

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 2 Final - Duke vs UCLA

Saturday, March 28, 2026

Sacramento, California, USA

Golden 1 Center

Duke Blue Devils

Coach Kara Lawson

Delaney Thomas

Toby Fournier

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by coach Kara Lawson. Coach, an opening statement, if you're able to give more perspective on what happened last night and looking forward to tomorrow's match-up.

KARA LAWSON: Definitely been a little bit of a whirlwind, obviously with the late game and the early start here today. But I guess it's the best kind of whirlwind you can have being on the winning side and now full-on preparation for our next match-up.

Talented team. A lot of weapons. Really good in every phase of the game. So they have our full attention, and we'll spend today getting prepared to be able to put our best foot forward tomorrow afternoon.

Q. I'm going to take us a little off topic. I'll preface by saying you've played here obviously in your pro career on the West Coast. I'm not making any assumptions about who gets on the Final Four but the Final Four is on the west of the Rockies for the first time since 1999 this year, which is a long time. Do you have any feeling about the importance of spreading the geography of the game's biggest showcase like this?

KARA LAWSON: Well, you know, what I'll say about the game and where it is across the country, at Duke, we recruit nationally, internationally. We have players from all over. We have a player from California on our roster, a player from Utah, a couple from Texas. And we try to make a point in our program to play all over the country as well because there's talent everywhere.

So that's served us well, to build rosters that have players



from all over the country. And I think it served us well to play in every part of the country, which we've done this year. So many of us do that in conference play now, which is a little new.

But I think it's good to be able to -- we have such a rich basketball history here, and we have so many great players from all over. So I think it's cool when the game comes to different parts of the country so that local fans have a chance to see it up close and personal, as opposed to having to travel to it.

Q. On the stage like March Madness, what does it mean for Black women to be leading from the sidelines? And how do you carry that responsibility in moments like this?

KARA LAWSON: I think the responsibility to lead is ever present. It's there every day, right? So I'm mindful of that every day. I know I'm the first African American basketball coach at Duke, such a prestigious university and what that represents, with our basketball history as an institution.

At the same time, this is a moment and a month that everything is magnified. And when you have success on this stage in March, it reaches so many more people than maybe a typical regular-season game in December and January, and I think that's great.

Most of the places I've been in coaching, you know, like when I was with the Celtics, I was the first female coach in the history of the organization. I don't want to say I'm used to that, because I think that gives off the connotation that it's just ho-hum. Like it's not ho-hum for me. I understand the weight of it and the gravity of it, and I'm proud to carry it.

Q. If you look at your evolution as a player from high school, then Tennessee, and where we are now in terms of transferring, speaking to a couple of athletic directors, and they were saying they were thinking the era we're in now with sort of unlimited transfers has dimmed the view of the ultimate goal of a degree for a lot of athletes who are transferring once, twice, three times. I was wondering, A, what do you think about



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that? And is there a difference between that and the men's game and the women's game? Because the women were always seen to be, because there wasn't money at the end of the rainbow, they were focused on education. I'm wondering now that the pot of gold has expanded, if this whole transfer thing might enhance the pursuit of degree or money comes first?

KARA LAWSON: Well, I first want to say you're a legend. I've been reading you a long time. Thanks for being here. Thanks for the question.

The pursuit of a degree, certainly from a high academic institution like Duke, in the families that we're targeting and recruiting, it's still of a high priority. So I would say there's a larger pocket of young women that still want that, that want to pursue that.

Whether that's dwindling or decreasing, that's hard for me to say. But I do feel like -- I mean, our players do really well in school. It's something that's important to them. The degree is important to them. And we're fortunate to have high levels of retention with our players.

I think a big part of that -- as much as I would love to say it's me and the basketball program, I think that's a part of it -- but I think a part of it is the institution that they play for and how important it is to them personally.

So I think it's there, but I do see your point that there's more factors out there that families and players have to make decisions. So by having more choices and more factors, that can erode the importance of a single one.

Q. First off, how long did it take you to turn the page on last night and obviously the excitement that went around it? The second part is just UCLA, you've played them before. But Betts was missing in that game. What do you take from the meeting four months ago to get you ready for tomorrow?

KARA LAWSON: It's a quick turnaround, there's no doubt. How do we turn the page? I mean, we just talk about it and physically turn it.

I haven't spoken to them yet, I mean, about the game. We haven't watched film yet. We haven't talked UCLA yet. So when they come in here, they're not going to be able to answer a ton of UCLA questions because we let them sleep and then come in here.

But we'll talk about that. Like anything that is challenging or that is just, like, real, I just say it to them. Like, try to get to bed last night, I know it's going to be hard because you're going to want to stay up because you're buzzing

after that. How can you not be, right?

Today we have to do that. We have to physically turn the page and get ready to prepare for a great team. They were without both Betts when we played them, not just one. And so totally different team. Without both of them, they kicked our butt. And it wasn't close.

And so we're mindful of how much better we have to play just to be in the game. And we're focused on putting together a game plan against one of the best teams in the country.

You look at their wins and their schedule and all of those things, it's impressive all the way around. And certainly their experience jumps off the page -- sixth-year senior, sixth-year senior, fifth-year senior, fourth-year senior. I mean they've got it all. We're excited for the challenge.

Q. Wanted to ask about your enjoyment with Xs and Os. I watched you on the sideline last night and it seems like every time you drew something up and you got a basket you were very excited, and obviously you're excited for your team. But it seems like you get a lot of enjoyment out of the chess match that is in-game and adjustments and things like that. How much do you enjoy that and where do you sort of put that focus, especially now in March when you're usually playing teams that you haven't played before and you're trying to find little things that you can pick at to get baskets or get stops?

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, it's just really about helping the players and trying to put them in positions to succeed. And my job as a coach is to try and generate quality looks at the basket. I can't make it for them, you know, but can I get them an open layup? Can I get them an open 3 by virtue of what action we run?

And that is a collaborative effort. So to sit here and say that I'm drawing them all up or I'm coming up with all the ideas -- I do draw them all up but I'm not coming up with all the ideas. That would be the wrong thing to say.

A lot -- not a lot, everything we do is, like, the ingredients are the assistants and their ideas, and they bring a ton to the table. I have a really experienced staff. I lean on them heavily, not just in preparation from a scheme perspective but also in-game from an adjustment perspective.

So four of my five assistants have been head coaches. So those in-game huddles that we have are very, very full of ideas, full of adjustments, and then it's about me making a decision of what ideas I want to take forward and bring to the huddle with the team.

Q. What does it mean to get a win in Sacramento, a place where you played professionally?

KARA LAWSON: Man, this place is so special to me. I mean, I'm telling you, so much juice behind the scenes. You've got have got no idea.

I'm walking in today. They're checking our bags. I mean, the security guy's going crazy. I mean, Michael -- his name's Michael, he's giving me a hug, and he's going, let's go. Baby. We've got one more game.

I'm going down the hallway, just coming up here, people are saying things to me. People are talking. And then I'm on the elevator and someone said this arena worker missed seeing you last night and this one said to say hi, and do you remember him?

That's my whole experience. The second I step foot in Golden 1 Center until I leave. Think about that. You walk down the street and people are gassing you up, man. You feel great. And I feel that's why I feel good I feel ready to go.

The support here is unbelievable. And it's palpable. I feel it. I feel it right now. I feel it from the city. And it's very meaningful to be back and to feel that and to hopefully make them proud, make them proud.

Q. You guys have won a lot of championships since you got here to Duke. I'm wondering, what would a Final Four mean considering how long it's been since the program's been there?

KARA LAWSON: The Final Four would be a great accomplishment. We're such a proud program. We've had so many great players that have come through our program. And these players here have such a special place in my heart for the players on this current team because they took a chance on me.

Ashlon Jackson, five years ago, when she decided to come to Duke, we didn't have anything or anybody. And I hadn't coached a game. Maybe I'd coached four of them, I think, my first year. And she believed we could do something here. She believed we could build a team that could contend for championships, that could be in games to go to a Final Four.

And you want to reward that as a coach. That's something I'm mindful of. We want to play our best game possible. We know we can't control results, but we want to play our best game possible. And for me, as a coach, I want to prepare them the best way possible, give them the best

chance at it.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about the Elite Eight experience? There's a lot of folks who think that this in the tournament is almost the hardest game to win because you're at the verge of the Final Four. As a player, as a coach, what goes into sort of preparing your team for this particular game in the tournament?

KARA LAWSON: I think the tournament's changed. When I was playing, it was the hardest game. But when I was playing, the first few rounds of the tournament were easier.

Now it's hard. You know, it used to be you were a 1 seed, a 2 seed, and you kind of could chart your way to the Elite Eight, first couple of rounds, maybe not even break a sweat.

Now, I mean, I sweat when the bracket comes out. You know? Like, it's hard. It's hard.

I don't know. Maybe this is just -- I always felt like you knew the Elite Eight was going to be your hardest game you had in the tournament because it was your first hardest game in the tournament, if that makes sense.

And now, you start early. I mean, we've had a lot of hard already. That doesn't mean tomorrow won't be harder, but, yeah, I don't sense that as a coach, but I definitely sensed it as a player.

Q. I don't know if someone asked you this last night but you were up by 10 in the fourth. You lose that lead and you have nine seconds left in the game. What did you tell your players within that last nine seconds there?

KARA LAWSON: Nine seconds, 9.2, 86-85, is that what you're talking about? What did I tell them? It wasn't long. I think I took a full timeout. I think it was a 60, not a 30, so I think the last one was a 30.

60, drew up the play for the lion's share of that. So let's say the first 40 seconds of that huddle was drawing up the action that we wanted to run. And I drew it twice to make sure everybody on the court knew what they were supposed to be doing.

Once I drew it twice, then the main protagonist in that play was Jackson coming off the screen to the ball. So I set some tips for her in the action, what her reads were and what sequence that they should be done in, just as a reminder. And then the play happens.

We get a quality look in the corner. Mair gets a good look

at it, had made four 3s on the game. So felt good about it. And just missed it. But then Wood makes a play on the rebound and we get a baseline out. That was 2.6. Right?

That was a 30. That one, drew it once because it was a 30, okay? Came out. And then they called timeout, right? So that helped me because I got to draw it again, and the same thing with Jackson there, making sure she knew what her looks were.

The main thing I wanted to say to her in that moment is, time is short and time is long. It's really weird at the end of the game. Like 2.6, you think, like, man, what can you do in 2.6 seconds? Well, what you don't want them to do is just catch it and launch it because two-point seconds is a long time.

So I just reminded Ash, like, you don't have to shoot it when you catch it. You have time to dribble, shot fake, whatever it is. And you know, lo and behold, she did both of those in 2.6 and got the shot up.

Q. You've seen different formats for regionals as a player, as a broadcaster and as a coach. Do you like this two-regional format? Do you like something different? You've seen it all in your time in all the different areas and aspects of your basketball career?

KARA LAWSON: I'll give you one thing that I'd change. I won't get into all that other stuff that everybody else does, let them people do it.

But in the day before the game, we get an hour practice on the game court. I think if you talked to most coaches, they'd say we'd like more time to be able to practice with the eight teams shuttling in and out of the arena. I would guess they'd all say, yeah, I'd like to get more time on the game court.

On the day before the game, you get an hour on the game court, and the day of the game, you get a 30-minute shoot-around. I think they should flip that. I think you should only get a half hour the day before the game and you should get an hour the day of the game of the shoot-around because that's a normal shoot-around for us.

So on your game day, everybody kind of gets their normal thing. And then the other teams just get the 30 minutes a day before to get some shots up. 30 minutes for a shoot-around is really hard. Cram everything in that you need.

So that gives you a normal-length shoot-around, and then you do 30 minutes of shots, you practice alternate sight anyway day before, you know. I don't know what that

impacts. I don't know.

Everybody else might hate that idea. That's okay, but that would be the only thing I'd change. I mean two regionals, I think the arena thing is the thing that's hard. It's not that we're in the same city, it's that we don't get long enough practice or shoot-around times in the venue for your most important games of the season. So that would be the thing.

Q. (Inaudible).

KARA LAWSON: We scored 87 points last night. When was the last time we did? We keep these balls, you think? We don't score like that, normally. Hopefully we're using these balls tomorrow? Hope so.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by student-athletes Delaney Thomas and Toby Fournier. Recount the last 12 hours, and did you get any sleep?

TOBY FOURNIER: I think after a game like that it's hard to get sleep just because you're so energized. Obviously having a shot like that at the end, when Ash hit it, it was just so crazy, it was so wild. And it was just kind of what March Madness is all about.

So being able to have that and then trying to go to sleep after was kind of hard. But, yeah, we were able to settle down a little bit, and obviously it's crucial for our recovery for Sunday's game. But just really a exciting moment.

DELANEY THOMAS: Yeah, definitely I think just trying to get some rest as much as possible. But it was very exciting for the team and for Ash to hit that big shot.

Q. Toby, you had 22 points last night but also notably 10-for-12 from the line, outside your percentage. What was working so well for you last night overall?

TOBY FOURNIER: I mean, I love that you brought that stat up. Thank you for that.

I think for me it was just trying to stay calm. Obviously March Madness is a lot going on -- a big crowd, a lot of people, you feel like there's a lot of attention on you. But I've been practicing my free throws. After every practice, we shoot, like, 100 free throws.

So just being able to go back to that, feeling like I'm back in the practice gym shooting those shots, I think that was really important for me because for the most part you know free throws are mental.

So just being able to take a deep breath, calm down, and

get into my shot was really important.

Q. I talked to both of you last night and both of you said that on that final play you were focused on running the play correctly. I'm just wondering, have you run that play before? Because coach said she called a 30-second timeout, she drew it up once. They called timeout and she drew it up a second time. Curious, was it something that you've run before or you've practiced before? Or was it something that she drew up in the moment?

DELANEY THOMAS: Yeah, I believe that was a play she drew up in that moment. We have not practiced that one.

Q. The game you played at UCLA a few months ago I'm sure is a distant memory, but what if anything did you take from it since the Betts sisters didn't play in it and you guys are a very different team than you were in November?

TOBY FOURNIER: Yeah, I think it's really important to take that game and apply it to this game. I think that we're both very different teams. UCLA has also made a lot of progress and so have we.

So I think that the most important part for us is just taking maybe the mistakes that we had or certain weaknesses from that game and just applying it to the next game and trying to just get better in the time that we have and prepare for them in the best way possible.

DELANEY THOMAS: Definitely. I think March is about who can compete and adjust the most. So just being out there, competing it, giving it our all, playing together as a team, it's going to be big.

Q. You guys won a shootout against the nation's top offense last night. How do you keep that momentum going into Sunday's game?

TOBY FOURNIER: I think it's really important to keep the energy that you have from this game into the next game. I think it gave us a level of confidence. I mean, I think we were confident before, but I think this kind of just showed what we can do, not only defensively, because we're known as a defensive team, but offensively as well.

DELANEY THOMAS: I agree.

Q. I'm not sure either of you guys were alive the last time Duke made a Final Four in 2006. So maybe close. I don't know. But what would it mean to you to get the program back there?

DELANEY THOMAS: I think it would be incredible. I think just Coach Kara and what she's built so far and just these girls that were able to be on the floor together, it's so special. And that would be amazing.

TOBY FOURNIER: Yeah, obviously I agree with Delaney. These are really the best people to do it with. I love my teammates so much. They're really just like my family, my sisters, especially with the seniors as well, Ash and Taina. They've been really important for me throughout my college career, especially my freshman year, because there was a lot going on, and they were really leaders for me. So being able to accomplish that with them would be incredible. Obviously we focus one game at a time. So we're just looking forward to the next game.

Q. Is there something you learned about your team last night that you didn't know before last night's game?

DELANEY THOMAS: I don't think there was anything we didn't know before. I think it was just experiencing it again with resilience. Just the highs and lows of that game and just how we pushed through together was really important to see again.

TOBY FOURNIER: Yeah, I agree. I think we know who we are. We've been able to now show that. I'm just really impressed with the girls and what we've been able to do. But I think we've had that confidence, and we know who we are as people and as a team.

Q. Kara was saying that you hadn't even got a chance to look at UCLA yet with the late night and the early start this morning. What's the challenge of a one-day turnaround like this, especially with a late game last night and the early game tomorrow, both physically and then in preparation?

DELANEY THOMAS: I think you have to just be able to adapt to the scheme. You have to learn quickly, be able to know what you're going to do defensively, offensively, and just have that kind of experience to do that.

TOBY FOURNIER: Yeah, I think obviously the scheme is going to be really important for us, being able to do scout and know what UCLA is going to want to do against us. I think the other big turnaround is just the soreness, physically. I think that's an obvious one.

But obviously we just played yesterday. So being able to get our bodies in shape and ready for the next game, especially a game against UCLA, who is also a very physical, very fast-paced team, is going to be important as well.

