

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

Sunday, March 29, 2026  
Sacramento, California, USA  
Golden 1 Center

**Duke Blue Devils**

**Coach Kara Lawson**

**Ashlon Jackson**

**Taina Mair**

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

UCLA - 70, Duke - 58

**KARA LAWSON:** Proud of our effort. I thought we started the game with the appropriate level of force and physicality and just played really hard and competed really hard.

In the second half, I think they did a great job of battling back into the game and taking the lead. We couldn't get our offense to be able to score in that second half. Compliment them for turning up their defensive intensity and that definitely impacted us.

And the quality looks we did get, we didn't hit, whether it was layups or open 3s. We had some transition opportunities with numbers that we didn't finish. Those are the differences in games like this.

But is I told the group after the game, just before we came up here, what a great season it's been for us. And this group has been a joy to coach every day.

From where we started to where we finished, I don't know that there's a team that grew more than we did in the country, from where we started to where we finished. That is all because of our players, their belief, their faith and their trust in each other and our staff.

That's hard to find. That's rare. It's rare to find players like this. I'm very mindful of that. And the reason I can say it's rare is because I've been in the sport for a long time and in a lot of capacities. It's rare to find players like these two, especially.

So the sadness, of course, at this time of year is when it's



your seniors' final game you, know you're not going to get the chance to coach them again. That's where it's emotional and that's where it's heavy.

But these two have changed our program. They've been the most influential class in our program since I've been here. They changed the tide of our program and turned us into champions -- you know, three ACC titles to their names and back-to-back Elite Eights. What they've been all about winning and they've sacrificed and so much to be able to earn that.

That example, why they're the most important class, that example is going to reverberate in our program for a long time.

Just lucky to have coached them. And as I told both of them, it's not over with me. They know that. I'm still going to be calling them and texting them and bothering them the rest of my life. Let's put it that way.

And I'm so grateful to these two and what they mean to me as a coach. Really, really special. Love you both.

**Q. How much has Coach Lawson and this program meant to you for three years for you, T, and for all four for you, Ashlon?**

**ASHLON JACKSON:** I committed to Duke my junior high school, and most people thought I was crazy for it. But the moment that I spoke to her, I already knew.

The authenticity, the passion, the determination -- not just to develop you as a player but as a person -- spoke volumes for me. I wanted to win, and she's won at literally every level. And she never changed, not one bit.

And that's something that I've valued a lot. She stayed real, especially in this type of environment now where the portal is crazy and everything. Like, she's the most loyal person I know.

All four years, she stuck right by my side and pushed me to become the player that I am today and the person that I am today.



Like I said, I'm just extremely blessed to have a Kara Lawson in my life. I am. And just extremely grateful for her. Like she said I'll be able to call her anytime that I want to.

But the past four years, really since I've committed to Duke, it's been life-changing for me, and I wouldn't trade it for the world.

TAINA MAIR: For me, my story's a little bit different because Coach Kara talked to me when I was in the portal. I came and visited Duke. My family absolutely loved it. I absolutely loved it. Then I ended up committing.

Being here, it's an honor to be coached by Coach Kara. She's the best of the best. She's, like, the best coach I've ever had in my life, somebody who gave me tough love. I mean, she challenged me, she loved me, she supported me and she kept it hard on me.

And that's what I needed to be able to be the player and the person that I am today. So I'm super appreciative of my time at Duke, with my sisters, with the whole coaching staff.

But Coach Kara, I'll always be in her phone all the time, texting her, calling her. She might be annoyed by me. But I'm going to make sure I'm always talking to her and everything.

**Q. As Coach Lawson said, you changed the tide and built the program. With that being said, even though this might be your last game at Duke, for both Taina and Ashlon, are there any light-hearted stories you might be willing to share throughout your years at Duke?**

ASHLON JACKSON: Too many to speak about. Well, yesterday -- not yesterday, the game before, in the Sweet 16, having the mentality that she has, like it's very -- it's a reflection, whenever we go out on the court and we do what we do.

I think it was the end of the game and she redrew the play twice. And everybody was just locked in. And she was, like, we're going to win this ball game.

Everybody believed. I think there were some giggles in there, but it wasn't really a giggle of we're not focused, but it's just that we believed that. And the way it went about, the whole thing, it was just great.

There's a lot of stories, for sure, but I'd say that was a top, for sure.

TAINA MAIR: There's a lot of stories, but I can't think of one.

**Q. UCLA, you guys built up that 10-point lead in the first half and they kind of shot it out of the cannon in that second half. What is it like playing against them? Because as Coach Lawson said, they turned up the intensity on their defense and they got the 16-6 run coming out to start the third quarter.**

TAINA MAIR: They're a really good team. They're super experienced. When they came out, we just didn't have a response to it. So credit to them for going into the locker room and making the correct changes to be able to win the game. But they played a great second half.

ASHLON JACKSON: Credit to them. Great team. The way they responded to the challenge we gave them in the first half was tremendous. Great coach. I really credit them a lot for competing and coming out and trail blazing at that point.

**Q. So last night, it was a similar scenario down in San Jose, where Purdue had a seven-point lead at halftime and then Arizona did a tremendous run like what just happened here. Did you at least caution them at halftime that UCLA may make a push in the third quarter?**

KARA LAWSON: I didn't watch the men's game last night so I can't speak to that. I'll have to take your word for it.

I think anytime you go into halftime, regardless of whether you're up or down, you want to emphasize the start of the third quarter to be able to be locked in and try to be the team that has the run coming out of the gates in the halftime.

So we talked about different adjustments that we felt like we needed to make, and continue to emphasize competing hard. That's what it was going to take.

They did a great job out of the gates there, forced some turnovers. I don't know how many we finished with -- 13 -- we had five in the first half. But they had some turnovers there in that third quarter that led to scores. The live-ball variety, and I thought got them going a little bit.

They were kind of uncharacteristic of us in the first half of us making some passes that weren't there. And certainly they took the lead, but it was still manageable there at the end of the third.

But I think we're always mindful, when you get to this stage



every team's really good. They're not just going to lay down. You know they're going to come back and they're going to make a run. And unfortunately we couldn't respond to it.

**Q. I'm just still thinking sort of about the full-circle moment of being back here in Sacramento, also coming up on the 30th season of the WNBA. I'm thinking about folks like you and Dawn who were there when the league started having such an impact or in those early years of the league now, having such an impact on this next generation of players. And, of course, for the fans here that once had you and the WNBA team here to now be able to watch you. I'm curious what you want people to know about the first generation of WNBA players that you played with and the impact that your generation is still having today on the game?**

KARA LAWSON: When we started playing, I didn't come in at the start of the league, but when I did come into the league, I think we were all very mindful of the fact that we were trying to grow the league, play great basketball and hopefully have, down the road, have it continue to grow in every way, from number of teams, to number of roster spots, to salaries, to resources.

We didn't have a lot of those things. I don't say that in a bad way or in a jealous way. We understood where we were at that point and that it needed to grow. We all just loved the game. That's why you play is you love it, being around it. I love to play.

When I finished playing, getting into coaching, to be able to impact the next generation of players, help them achieve their dreams on and off the court and hopefully experience a better WNBA when they get to their professional level. So it all fits.

I think we're all really invested in the league doing well and succeeding. And very happy about how it's grown since I finished playing.

**Q. Can you talk a little bit about Lauren Betts and how difficult she is to deal with and her footwork and how good she is? And secondly, you got to see Jerry Reynolds, I think, who was with you with the Monarchs this week; I don't know if he was here today. But can you also talk about what he means to you and basketball and your journey?**

KARA LAWSON: Lauren is terrific. Certainly one of the top players in the country. And her size and her skill make her difficult to defend one-on-one. And then the framework of their team with the shooting around her makes it really

hard to bring an extra defender, is kind of how they've built and matched the skill sets.

So we toggled between bringing help and not bringing help, and it's just really hard the whole game to defend her. I got a chance to spend a little time with her in December. She came to our national team camp at Duke. And it was great to get to know her.

She's really focused and really wants to be a good player. And she already is, but I think she has a chance to be a really good player at the next level as well.

So what you saw is hard. Her size and her skill just make it difficult to defend when she catches it up there and keeps it up there.

As far as Jerry, he made such an impact on my life. He was the GM that drafted me here to Sacramento. So he was the first person at the professional level to believe in my ability, to believe that I could impact the team and come here and carve out a role.

The other thing about Jerry that was really important in my development was, you know, a lot of times with young players, people will ask them what are their goals? With young people, you ask them a lot, what are your goals? What do you want to do?

And when I was a young WNBA player, I had big goals. I wanted to be a WNBA champion. I wanted to be a WNBA All-Star. I wanted to be an Olympic gold medalist. I wanted to have double-digit years in the league as a professional. So if someone asked me early in my career what I wanted to do, I would say all those things.

And most people would laugh at that. I don't know if any of you guys have ever done that. You talk to a precocious kid, and they say they want to do all these things and you kind of chuckle, you're like good luck with that, man, good luck achieving those things.

And when I would talk with Jerry, he would listen to me, and then he'd say, you can do that. You can do that.

Amazing, right? Amazing to feel that level of belief. Like, it's one thing to say, I believe in you. But to feel that level of belief. So he always believed that not only in me to draft me, but also what I could become and the potential that I had.

We've stayed in touch over the years, and he's been a great supporter. He was not here today, but he's been texting me after the games and things like that.

And just lucky, lucky to have crossed paths with him, for sure.

**Q. You talked a little bit about in in your opening statement, but just three years ACC championships, back-to-back Elite Eight runs. Just the growth you've seen in your program. What does it take for this program to go from here to getting to that Final Four? What does that next step look like to just push you guys beyond and get to that next spot?**

KARA LAWSON: I think it just takes continuing to go get here. You've got to put yourself in position to be in this game in order to win. I don't think we have to wholesale change the type of player we recruit or how we're developing our players or anything like that.

We've had a really nice, steady upward trend. I love our identity. And I think our identity does win in March. We've just got to continue to have these types of experiences. And at some point, you know, you break through.

But our group, the last couple years, has put ourselves in this position. I would much rather be here and not win than be sitting at home and not have the opportunity.

So you just keep going at it and you keep trying. Our players that are underclassmen, the last couple years, freshmen and sophomores, man, they have so much knowledge now and so much experience to be able to point to these types of games.

And it's not just the games we lose; it's also the games that we won. When you look at our Baylor game and you look at our LSU game. There's growth and there's lessons in all of those.

We'll just continue to keep working and developing and we've got a whole new class of freshmen coming in next year that will be able to help us, but that we're going to have to develop as well.

**Q. You mentioned UCLA live-ball turnovers, them scoring off of those. You guys had 16 points off turnovers in the first half and only two in the second. What changed, in your eyes, on that front?**

KARA LAWSON: Well, the first thing that changed was they turned it over less, okay, from the first half to the second half, if I remember correctly, from the halftime box. I think they may have had 11 or 12 in the first half, and they only finished with 18.

So they did a much better job of taking care of the ball, so the opportunities to get those points were a lot smaller.

And then what I mentioned in my opening statement, our conversion on those live-ball turnovers, we missed those layups or we made the wrong read when we had the numbers. That's going to happen sometimes, but in a game like this, you've really got to convert your chances.

I thought that's what they did a good job of in the second half. When they got their chances and they got their opportunities, they converted.

**Q. Last year, y'all were up, I don't even know how many points, but you were up on South Carolina in the Elite Eight. They made some adjustments in the fourth quarter to come back and win. You know, did this game kind of feel like déjà vu with a similar situation at all?**

KARA LAWSON: I wasn't thinking about South Carolina while we were trying to defend Lauren Betts and UCLA. That's not a thought that crossed my mind. So, no, that wasn't anything that I thought of during this game.

**Q. Good to see you back here in Sacramento, all the stuff that you've done and the 2005 squad was the only championship that we had seen in the last 21 years and you were part of that. And everybody appreciates you doing that. But Duke University, you have leveled up this program. What is the anatomy to work with your coaching staff, the athletic department in order to build an institution that you have over these years?**

KARA LAWSON: Well, I think we have a great collaborative team that exists within our athletic department. Obviously starts with President Price, the president of our university, Nina King, our athletic director. We have a lot of great coaches in our program, not just in women's basketball, but all over our campus.

And it's a community that is full of excellence in many areas. Obviously, Duke is a very proud academic institution. It's one of the top academic schools in the country. Our students are high level. They're excellent. Our athletes are high level, and they're excellent.

That's one of the reasons I wanted to be the coach here because being around that type of community and environment inspires me every day. I felt like I could grow the women's basketball program to be one of the top programs in the country when I took the job.

And we're on our way to be able to do that. It's about finding motivated players and players that want to be challenged on the court but also in the classroom. We've been able to do that, and I have a great staff. My assistant

coaches are really experienced as well.

And everybody's invested in winning, and you have to have that to be successful. In this era of college sports, you have to have everybody at your university invested in winning. We have that at Duke, and I think that's a big reason why we've done really well these last few years.

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