

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 4 Semifinal - Oklahoma vs South Carolina

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Sacramento, California, USA

Golden 1 Center

**South Carolina Gamecocks**  
**Coach Dawn Staley**

**Raven Johnson**

**Tessa Johnson**

**Joyce Edwards**

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



**Q. With the impact and the success that you've had in this South Carolina community, how does it feel to see Joyce's leap from year one to year two and her growth, knowing that she's doing it from essentially her backyard?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, we pride ourselves on actually making sure that our local, top players stay at home. We make it very difficult for them to leave. Obviously the community is very strong. And I do think a lot of times our local superstars love playing in front of their families and love playing in front of a great crowd.

Joyce's progress from year one to year two has been outstanding. I think that progress got sped up a little bit more because of Chloe went down early in the season, and I think Joyce just took it upon herself to want to win. She's got the space and the focal point, the structure of allowing her to just kind of play freely.

And she studies the game. She knows what things she needs to correct from last season to this season, and she's doing that in real time.

**Q. Sort of the opposite end of the spectrum, you have Alicia Tournebize. How do you identify a prospect like her, an international prospect? And do you think international recruiting is becoming a bigger part of the recruiting process?**

DAWN STALEY: Well, when we recruited Ali, we had some small introductions with her mom, and then we just have mutual people that we know. And then the communication started. I'm talking to them. You know, it's you talk to these people and you just kind of talk to all the people that have an "in" with the family, and then you take it from there.

I think where it really escalated was, not when Coach Bower and I went there, went to France in October. It escalated when there was talk of her possibly being able to play right away. And that is the thing that really intrigued them as a family, because she wasn't playing as much on her pro team as she wanted to play. And that's when

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by South Carolina head coach Dawn Staley.

**Q. A lot's been talked about, this is one of the two teams that beat you this year. Not looking for state secrets, but how much do you tweak or game plan going into this game, or do you tweak anything at all?**

DAWN STALEY: I don't think we tweak from what we didn't do the last time. I think we tweak from where we want to play in a tournament and the things that we need to do to stay organized. So it's that.

I'll address -- we're not motivated by we're avenging a loss. We're motivated by advancing. It's not like, oh, they beat us last time, let us do this or that. It's survive and advance.

It is to have more points than they do at the end of the 40 minutes or however long it takes.

**Q. Have you had any interactions with Kymora during her Sweet 16 run? And how has your relationship evolved over the course of this season?**

DAWN STALEY: No interaction. I've spoken to Coach Mox a few times. I always send her a text to congratulate her. I think I went to UVA over the Christmas break and got a chance to sit and chat with her, and just letting her know she's done a great job. We're back to our glory days at UVA.



things sped up.

So we're very fortunate she did choose us. She has a really bright future. I think she's doing great coming into the middle of the season and having to deal with the competitiveness and physicality of the SEC, to now, just being able to contribute and help us.

**Q. You said after the win in Baton Rouge that Raven Johnson was going to be someone you were going to miss the most. I'm just curious, what is it about Raven that makes her so special and makes her such a great person for this team and such a leader?**

DAWN STALEY: Well, what I like about Raven is, it's not often that young people are comfortable in their skin at a young age. She's very comfortable in her skin. And if you're not comfortable in your skin, you're going to be uncomfortable around Raven, because she's going to say some things that are unexpected but are pretty on point. So I like that. I like the fact that she is unpredictable but true to herself.

And then I love Raven during this time because it reminds me of playing on an Olympic team, where nothing really matters but winning. Points don't matter, who gets the notoriety -- Raven just wants to win. And I love the purity of that. So I'll miss that.

**Q. One of the things that Jennie was talking about was the fact that you guys have been standard bearers for so long in the SEC, how hard that is to do. I wonder if you could talk about that, and also then what you think they've brought to the league, maybe their style of play, or what they've brought to the SEC, joining it?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's hard to sustain. We've done a really good job of bringing players in that really understand that. It really is somewhat of a sacrifice coming to South Carolina because you're going to play basketball for all the right reasons.

It doesn't mean that it's always, like, my way or the highway. It's not. It's a collaborative thing. Our players are very comfortable with communicating the things that they like and don't like. I'm very comfortable doing that.

But I'm always going to err on what's best for our program. And a lot of times what's best for our program is the way we operate and the way players have a mutual respect for basketball and for their futures.

So, yes, it's really hard. It's really hard because it's super competitive in the SEC. I do think some people get a little bit of South Carolina fatigue and the success we've had

and the sustained success that we've had.

And that's okay by us because, again, we respect the game. We want to do things the right way, and sometimes that's not the most popular thing.

I think Oklahoma brings to the SEC, like you're prepared for a different style of play when you get to the tournament, like now. We don't have to familiarize ourselves with someone that plays as fast as they play. We don't have to familiarize ourselves for having a big or sometimes when they sell Beers out, they go small and they space the floor.

So you get a glimpse of what that looks like, and it sets you up for success beyond our league. And that's why we have, what, five, six teams in the Sweet 16.

**Q. In South Carolina, when you played Southern Cal, we ran into a mother/daughter who traveled from Philly. They made the trip several times to Columbia this year. Some fans have rearranged. They were banking on Fort Worth, but they've been trying to rearrange to get out here to Sacramento. And then I met a fan from Orange County yesterday who said you and Cheryl Miller were her favorite players growing up and she just had to be here. When you traveled this far from home and still see Gamecock fans at the team hotel and in the arena, what do you think that says about the program you've built?**

DAWN STALEY: It's normal. Like, it's really normal for us. It's incredible. The story was great, too. I did see it. Great story. I do remember now from my Temple days as well.

I think it's just nowadays, fans are just really versed in women's basketball. They really understand. They want more access. They want more content. And I think the media people do a great job. The creatives are doing a great job at getting who South Carolina is -- and I'm just saying South Carolina because we're here -- but each and every program has somebody putting out content that will bring fans in of wanting more and more.

But I think we've got something pretty special at South Carolina where it's a gift and a curse because they bought their tickets to Fort Worth thinking we were going to be in Fort Worth. And we didn't take care of business, and we didn't control our own destiny. Now they're finding ways to make it work from a monetary standpoint to get to Sacramento.

But super proud. We won't have the type of success that we have had without the support of our fans.

**Q. Coach Close was saying yesterday how the game has changed; that she doesn't know how much longer she'll be doing this because of the NIL and transfers and all the other stuff that's going on. You've excelled at this for so many years. How have you seen the game change the last -- let's say, since COVID hit a few years ago? And they changed the transfer portal. It will be now after the (indiscernible) over. What do you think the future is for this?**

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I think we're in a world where it's transactional. Simply, it's transactional. We can try to keep the core principle of who we are as coaches and the sanctity of the team and try to create -- for me, I coach from my days being on an Olympic team. That is how I coach. Meaning -- I try to coach -- where the team, it's the team's success.

We know that individuals make up the success of a team. And you deal with each player and you have them, you try to get them in a position where they understand their worth, right? And then you coach from there.

NIL has really changed everything. It really has changed how you have to move day to day. You have to make sure psychologically our kids are in a good place, mentally, that they're in a good place -- and their parents.

You're actually having to do a lot of work. If you're not used that part of it, it will run you out of the business, because it's no longer just coaching. I wish -- I welcome the two hours that we get to be on the court because nothing else enters into that space at that time.

It's the 22 hours beyond that that you have to really go in and exhaust yourself making sure that everybody's good, from day to day, from week to week and definitely in the postseason.

I mean, I welcome change. I like challenges. I like to figure out things and still find a way to be successful. I think when that leaves me, then I know it's time for me to move on.

**Q. What has Madina meant to this team, and what's it been like for you just to see her journey from Kenya to the U.S.?**

DAWN STALEY: Madina's been great. We deemed her Big Mama because she's just so much bigger than everybody else. She's so gentle with her speech. She's a quiet soul. But she has a real thirst to be better, to be great.

It's unfortunate that she hasn't really had enough

basketball experiences to be great. So she's in a training ground for being great.

I think her coming to South Carolina and getting a different type of experience, just different. Playing for our team, there's a lot of scrutiny. There's a lot of expectations. And it's great for her to have to go through it. Even if she's challenged, mentally, because I know it's a mental toll on how she wants to move. She wants to be great for her, for her country, for us and the next level.

I think she has probably been one of the main reasons why we sit where we sit. She's got, I don't know, 22, 23 double-doubles in this season. I mean, that's really hard to do in the league we play in. And she's found a way to do that.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by student-athletes Joyce Edwards, Tessa Johnson and Raven Johnson.

**Q. Raven, Dawn was in here earlier talking about how her priority wasn't at all about revenge against Oklahoma from the game earlier and just focused on advancing. Do you see it in the same way? Or do you have sort of any desire to get a lick back on OU?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean, we all see it in the same way. Honestly, she told us in practice what she said here. I think, you know, it's not really about getting a lick back.

I mean, we just gotta come here and do what we do, play to a standard that we know we can play and bring our practice habits to the game. So I think it's all about advancing and beating the team that's in front of you.

**Q. Tessa, the other day we asked Dawn if she'd ever seen a player with a shot release as quick as yours. And she said Diana Taurasi. I don't know if you've heard that. What's your reaction? How do you think you compare to Taurasi?**

TESSA JOHNSON: She was actually one of the players that my dad told me to watch when growing up. So I take that as a compliment from her. So thank you to Coach Staley.

**Q. Raven, Oklahoma's Coach Jennie was talking about how when their team goes up against South Carolina, it's not just competing against this current group, but it's competing against the history of your guys' program. I'm just curious, do you guys ever think of what South Carolina represents, what you guys represent in these Gamecock jerseys, this current team, and all the women that came before you as well?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: Oh, yes, definitely. I played with some of the greats that were here, like, example Aliyah Boston. I could keep going.

But I think when we go in practice, they literally have banners of some of the greats that got drafted in the first round. And I think we look at those and that kind of reminds us what the legacy that's been here.

You walk by the CLA and you see A'Ja Wilson statue and what she's doing on social media all you see is her. What she is doing for women's basketball, I think it says a lot for the program, what Coach Staley and -- A'ja Wilson won the first national championship here.

And I think we're playing more than just for us is bigger than us. It's for South Carolina on our chest and I think the legacy that people did in front of us.

TESSA JOHNSON: Yeah, I think we always talk about the standards. So committing here, we knew the standard. We knew that we wanted to win. And I think just bringing that and just keeping, like Raven said, the legacy going is important to us.

JOYCE EDWARDS: Yeah, the previous players has created a culture expectation that South Carolina holds. It's not something I individually think about when playing because I just want to win just like probably they did. But the culture and the expectation is there only because they paved the way for us to be in this position and to be a winning program.

**Q. Coach was in here earlier talking about how Raven is comfortable in her skin, and if you're uncomfortable, she's going to make you comfortable and just push you and test you. What is it about Raven that makes her not only a great leader but just pulls out the best in everybody else on this team?**

TESSA JOHNSON: I would say her mindset and her personality. She's always talking about being true to yourself. And I think that the fact that she can just be so herself allows us to be ourselves around her. And I think that she builds a lot of trust with her teammates, and she values relationships a lot. And, yeah, she is very comfortable in her skin.

JOYCE EDWARDS: I feel like Raven is a hard worker and she stays true to herself, like Tessa was saying. We know what to expect from her. She's such a reliable player to the point where when she says something to you, you take it to heart.

Like, yeah, she's goofy a little bit, but she always tells me I'm unstoppable and she'll tell people that nobody can guard them. She's constantly instilling confidence in her players.

And, I mean, she's a great player. So coming from her who's been a part of this program for so long, it's just something that is kind of irreplaceable.

**Q. Tessa, from your vantage point, can you tell us the backstory behind the Who Can Guard Tessa T-shirt, and what it's like to see your teammates wearing that on the sidelines in the tournament?**

TESSA JOHNSON: I appreciate the support. The fact that, what Joyce was saying earlier, our teammates bring confidence to everyone else. Yes, it's Raven, but it's Joyce too. It's everyone. You can see it on the bench. You can see even the coaching staff or just our staff in general, it's just like a family kind of culture.

I feel like Chloe was wearing it to support me, and just that just shows like a little bit of support that we all bring to each other. If that makes sense.

**Q. Do you know where they got the baby picture on the shirt? Was that an agent or a parent?**

TESSA JOHNSON: I think my mom sent it in -- didn't we have baby pictures for something?

JOYCE EDWARDS: It was a media thing. They asked us for baby pictures. We didn't know what it was initially. But you know, can you find this and it was that baby picture.

TESSA JOHNSON: Then it just got out there.

**Q. Joyce, with the amount of different ways that Oklahoma offense plays, push the pace, how good they are 1 to 5, just what's the challenge of defending a team like that, especially for 40 minutes?**

JOYCE EDWARDS: I think the biggest challenge is that they're very fast. Obviously, they one of the higher-paced offenses in the nation.

But they have a very big dominant post player with shooters around her. I feel like that's the most challenge because you can help. But if you help too much, you're going to get a 3 knocked down your face.

There's a balance to the situation. And you have to stop it. You have to stop both the 3-point line and her on the inside, plus their pace, and their rebounding, also.

**Q. Raven, you talked about the people who have come before you. Someone like Aliyah Boston. What have those people that have come before you taught you about how to be a leader for this group and how to help bring out the best in everyone else and make them comfortable in their own skin?**

RAVEN JOHNSON: I remember when I was a freshman, they were hard on me. I used to call them grandmas. I was, like, geez, they're so serious about everything because I'm so goofy.

I think they were great leaders. They always talked about pro habits. They always say, you need to take good habits everywhere you go because those are contagious and they carry on to other people. So I always carry that with me and always instill that into my head because that's actually true. But I think they were actually great leaders on and off the court.

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