

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional Final: Texas vs South Carolina

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Alamodome - Hemisfair

South Carolina Gamecocks

Coach Dawn Staley

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference



South Carolina - 62, Texas - 34

Q. Coach Staley, congratulations on winning the region and making it back to the Final Four. Can you just talk about the journey of this team, and in particular, to see players put it all together like Zia Cooke has had her ups and downs to be the regional most outstanding player. And then Laeticia with her knee injuries, to just have a tremendous regional as well and make the All-Region team. How does that make you feel as a coach? I know you said in the past you're a dream merchant. To see these young players' dreams coming true on the big stage with still so much more out there?

DAWN STALEY: Young people are incredibly resilient. We happened to luck up on some great ones in all the players that you mentioned. They don't come fully wrapped properly. That is what college is for. That is what college is a training ground for them understanding what they need to do to be successful. Sometimes being successful, you've got to go through some things. You've got to go through some things personally, individually. Sometimes that's packed with an injury or two.

I'm really super proud of L.A. for how she just stayed the course. She never got rattled. She just stayed the course. Zia, you know, I saw some of the social media posts that people were talking about Zia. And some of the shots she took throughout the season.

You can't shut a player down like Zia, like as a coach. Like don't shoot the ball, don't. You have to teach her along the way how to be more deliberate, how to trim the fat off of her game. So she's in a position to do what she did for us on the biggest stage.

But every single one of our players have gone through

something and our coaches. They probably don't want me to say this, but I'm going to say it. We're not going to -- we had an assistant coach lose her mother while being in this bubble. We've had a player lose her uncle the other day. It would have been very easy for them to say family's first. I got to go home. I've got to leave this bubble. But the sacrifice and resiliency. We've got another one that's going through cancer treatments.

But they all are able to just put things to the side, focus on the task at hand, and then pick it up when we're done what we're doing.

So that's the commitment that young people have, and people really don't know they're going through those things, but they handle them with so much class. I am just incredibly proud of them. I'm glad I'm part of their village because they are some of the -- aside from being great basketball players, they are super great people. I mean, they don't give us any issues. If they do give us issues, we talk it out. We don't hold grudges. We just handle it, and we move on.

They are incredibly strong for being able to handle all of that. And to perform the way they need to perform. I do think we are mentally tough, and I question that from time to time, but when they're able to tangibly do what they did today, they made huge strides, and that's all we were trying to do throughout the season is get them to a point where we could compete for a National Championship.

All the other stuff, those are great lessons that we could fall -- look back on and say, hey, if another teammate is going through that, we did this. We corrected it, and we moved on and checked off one of our goals.

Q. When you took over at South Carolina, they hadn't been to the NCAA Tournament in five years. You're now taking this team to its third Final Four in the last six postseasons. I'm just curious, when you got to Columbia, like did you have a timeline for establishing this level of success and this expectation, or is that something that you can't even have a concrete timeline or even a general timeline for?

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DAWN STALEY: When I came to South Carolina, I was used to just winning, to be quite honest, and then when I came here, I thought we would just do the same thing, work hard. The fruits of your labor will produce success, and it was the opposite, the other end of the spectrum where I don't know if I was patient enough. Obviously, I thought we could get it turned around in at least three years.

Our AD Eric Hyman was like -- actually, it was more like he said three to four years, and I was like looking at him like you must not know me. You must not know who you hired. He knew more than I did of what was here in South Carolina, the type of players that were here, and I know they would think differently, and I know they think differently now that they've seen how this program has grown.

They weren't -- they didn't want to be pros. They wanted to be something else. They wanted to impact the world in other professions in life, and basketball was a by-product of that.

But once we got the players in here that the majority of our team loved basketball because, if the majority of your team is lazy people, majority of your team is people aren't driven, unmotivated, that's who you're going to be. But if the majority of your team is the opposite, that's who you're going to be. Once we got those players in here, they were able to do it for the love of the game, not because we were telling them to do it, but because they loved the game.

Once that happened, things started to turn, and we were fortunate to have some of the best talent in the country in the state of South Carolina. So we just tried to corner the market to make sure that we got every great kid that was in the state, talented kid that was in the state of South Carolina to South Carolina. Once we got that, then they said, if you win, they will come. If you build it, they'll come. Our fans have done a great job at actually giving us what a successful basketball program should look like and creating a home court advantage.

Q. Dawn, when you look at holding Texas to zero points in the fourth quarter, holding them to 23 percent on the game, I guess was that the best defensive performance you guys have had this season, or is it close to?

DAWN STALEY: I really didn't realize that they didn't score in the fourth quarter. I looked at the stat sheet late, after the celebration, and I didn't realize that. It didn't feel like that.

I say we were just locked in. We were a team that was

driven to be where we are right now, and it's just they wanted to go to the Final Four. They want to win a National Championship. They're going to give it up on both sides of the ball.

So was it -- I thought it was a pretty good defensive performance, but I also think that Texas was a little tired. They gave every single thing that they had in that Maryland game. And I didn't -- you know, I said they may have some weary legs, but their hearts are going to keep beating, and their hearts did keep beating. It's just that we just never let them off the hook. And that's the kind of approach you have to take, especially when you're playing against a Vic Schaefer team and the performance that they had two nights ago.

So I mean, Vic's got them in a great place. I know that every player that's on his roster and every recruit that he's recruiting saw that performance, and when they lock into a coach, great things will happen.

Q. We all know last year going in, you were going to be number one. COVID took so much away from everyone. I know in the tournament sometimes you've got to move on pretty quickly from a big moment, but with all everyone's gone through in the past year, do you have to savor these moments a little bit more now, or do you still have to move on pretty quickly with the Final Four so close?

DAWN STALEY: We're going to enjoy this. We're going to enjoy it because, again, you never know when things will be taken away from you. Last year things were taken away. I'm glad our players fought to be in this position because we had two very special seniors that didn't get a chance to finish their careers out in the form of playing in the NCAA Tournament.

So Ty and Kiki, these nets are certainly for you, and we appreciate the legacy that you left with our players to put them in this position to compete at a high level, to forge ahead even though you guys left a big void on our team. We're going to enjoy it.

24-hour rule. Tomorrow this time we'll move on to whoever our next opponent will be.

Q. Congratulations, Dawn. I wonder if I could ask you, I know you talked about Adia. Adia is the second former WNBA player to make it after you, and for the first time we'll have two Black women coaching in the Final Four. What does that mean to you? I know how much you've tried to mentor younger people and have been so grateful to those who have mentored you. What has it meant to both of you being in the Final



Four?

DAWN STALEY: I'm super proud of Adia. I wanted that to happen. I was cheering for her to get it done. It was not for any other reason besides us being represented at the biggest stage of women's college basketball.

And that's because there are so many Black coaches out there that don't get opportunity because, when ADs don't see it, they don't see it, and they're going to see it on the biggest stage of a Friday night that two Black women are representing two programs in the Final Four, something that has never been done before.

You know, our history here in women's basketball is so filled with so many Black bodies that for this to be happening in 2021, to me, is long overdue, but we're proud. We're happy. I know my phone is probably full of text messages of Black coaches all across the country, just congratulating us on doing that, on being present, being in the moment, being able to take our programs to this place.

But certainly, I know Adia utilizes all of her basketball knowledge as a player, and she's been a coach long enough that she's not just a suit. It's always going to be part player in us, and that's why our players, we are so relatable to them. We understand it because it's coming from a place where we've done that. We're trying to help you get to a place where we can have longevity in our league.

Representation matters. It's nothing against anybody else that lost to us. But when you see two Black women representing in this way, I hope the decision makers who are -- because there are a lot of jobs out there that you give Black women an opportunity. Not just give them the job. Bring them in. Interview them. If you don't hire them, let them know why. Let them know why so we can continue to work on and just perfecting what our craft and our profession because there are a lot of people out there that aren't getting the opportunities that they should because this is exactly what can happen when you give a Black woman an opportunity.

Don't get me wrong. I don't want people to start bashing me on social media about just hire the most qualified coach. If it was that easy, if it was that easy, there would be more Black head coaches in our game.

Q. Dawn, congratulations. I'm hoping you can talk to me about what it meant to see Aliyah have the type of game that she had against, in Charli, somebody who is a consensus (indiscernible) a player at this point, more specifically?

DAWN STALEY: I thought -- honestly, I thought Aliyah came in, her eyes were wide open. And I thought the moment may have gotten the best of her early on. It took her a while to settle in to be the Aliyah we need every game, but Aliyah does so many other great things for us. She didn't score the ball today, but she rebounded. She defended. She was there. She was present. You've got to guard her. When she's on the floor, you've got to guard her with a player and probably a half a player.

So she afforded us opportunities, afforded Zia opportunities, afforded Henny opportunities, and L.A. played tremendously well, as well as Victoria Saxton. I'm super proud of her. She's got to continue to grow and meet these moments in every statistical category.

Q. Congratulations, Dawn, on the victory tonight. You mentioned in the very beginning about the resiliency of this team and what they've been going through since they even arrived in this bubble. How have you been able to get this team and this group to be so collective and united and focused on a purpose to achieve this goal here tonight?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, inside of this team, there's always been a oneness, and we didn't always play that way, but deep inside of them, they just want to win, and throughout the year, they just didn't know how to win. Utilizing everybody around them because they always are -- they always bet on themselves. They always had to bet on themselves in high school, and then coming to college, the collective group of talent that blessed us coming to South Carolina, some days you're going to have great days, some days you're going to have to sacrifice.

Through those sacrificial times is when your confidence can tilt the wrong way because you're not performing the way you think in your mind the way you need to perform.

Once we lost to Texas A&M in the regular season, this team took on a different personality. This team just gave it up. They peeled away all the layers, and they just came together as one. I do think our timing was impeccable to bring in this couple. I always talk about this couple, Felicia and Johnny Allen. We brought them in at the end of the regular season, and then part of the postseason, and they just brought our team together. They shared things that they don't share in every day life. It takes people who are experts in it. Felicia and Johnny are experts in life skills. Experts in getting teams to work as a collective unit.

And that's not just talk. It is -- they put them in situations where they have to meet each other halfway with communication and realness and genuine and depth. So once we were able to do that, you see we're a different



team. Everybody that I talked to, they started crunching the numbers and saying, oh, we're -- you know, we're 3-4 in the last seven games. We're 2-2 in the last four games. I mean, you can make something look good or bad with numbers depending how far you want to go out.

Make no mistake, this team stuck together, this team came together, and this team is playing some of the best basketball at the right time, and for all the people that doubted this moment, you can come on back. We always got room on the bandwagon for you.

Thanks, Joe, for the question. I'm honored to coach this basketball team, and I truly give God the glory for allowing us to be in these moments.

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