

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Women's Final Four

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South Carolina Gamecocks

Dawn Staley

Postgame Media Conference



Stanford 66, South Carolina 65

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by head coach Dawn Staley. We'll take questions.

Q. Those frantic final seconds, just how much did you draw it up to have that pressure on the ball, to steal it? What were your reactions when you saw both those layups go up?

DAWN STALEY: You know, at the point of about 13 seconds, we had to foul. Then once we fouled the first time, second time we just kind of went all out and tried to turn them over to see if we could at least get a shot at the basket.

I mean, we got a pretty decent two looks at it. Layup, follow-up. I thought just about the UConn game. I thought it was going to be redemption for Aliyah, just for that ball to drop in for her. But it wasn't in the cards for us. We got to give God the glory in victories and defeats.

But, I mean, I just told our players, the margin of error is that small. It's that small to competing for a national championship, winning a national championship. It won't be our last time being in this situation.

Next year we just got to practice with that margin of error in mind.

Q. You talk about the redemption from the UConn game, you talk a lot about the mental toughness that this team has shown throughout this tournament. What did it show about them to come back from six points down to have a chance to be in that position at the end?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, we never flinched. Although we turned the ball over at certain times, they widened their

lead to six. Even with us playing probably not the best basketball, but we did enough to put ourselves in a position to win the game.

I mean, look at all the stats. We outrebounded them. We make more threes, attempted more threes. We got more offensive rebounds. We had less turnovers. I mean, we get to the free-throw line. I mean, the difference in the basketball game when you look at the stats is their second-chance points.

A big one hurt us at the end of the game in which we took the lead and we couldn't come up with the ball. We had our hand on it. Haley Jones ended up with the ball. Just kind of threw up a prayer, made it difficult for us to get out of that hole.

Q. I know this isn't how you wanted it to end. Looking ahead to next season, tonight with Aliyah in some foul trouble, Stanford outscored you by 14 when she was on the bench. Just looking ahead, what do you feel needs to go different in the off-season to make sure there's not that much of a gap distance if she has to sit in some games like?

DAWN STALEY: We're not going to anticipate her sitting like this. I mean, she's not one that gets herself into foul trouble. I do feel like Aliyah Boston is one of the best players in our game. She should be able to be on the floor for as long as it takes for us to play games. That's one.

Two, I mean, we have to crowd her space a little bit more. She's got to work a little bit more in double and triple teams. But I'm proud of her. I mean, she improved. It's hard to see when great players improve, but you saw that over year one and year two.

We'll continue to get better. I mean, this experience has been great. We got some young guns coming in that will help us.

So I told our team, hopefully in the future we can be on the other side of this emotion.

Q. You told us a couple times this season how hard

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Aliyah is on herself after losses. When you see her having that chance and that shot not going in, you see the emotion and pain on her face, what do you say to her in a moment like that?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, it's tough because it's real personal to her. I mean, it sticks with her. It's part of the game. It's part of the game.

One or two moments like that don't define who she is as a player. So I hope that she'll get over it. She won't for a long time. But for what she gives us -- she had 16 rebounds. I mean, 16 tough rebounds. When she was crowded all night, they schemed for her. They had a game plan for Aliyah Boston when she was on the floor. When she's off the floor, it gives a team a huge advantage.

We had to sub her in and out at the end of the basketball game, in the fourth quarter. When she was in there, she gave us an opportunity to close the gap and win the game, an attempt to win the game.

Q. How does this opportunity right now, whether it's in a win or defeat, how can you use this as a teaching tool going forward with your team?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, the teaching tool is, I mean, we're inches from competing for a national championship on Sunday. That is the margin of error that you need to practice with. That is that.

The lesson, if there isn't a big lesson in that... We'll put ourselves in the same position or worse.

Q. Did you see the non-call on the kicked ball? What did you think about that at the end?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, the officiating, they got a tough job, a tough job. There are dreams on the line. Everybody wants to compete for a national championship.

I saw the kicked ball. I didn't make a big deal out of it. But, I mean, I don't know what you want me to say. I can't say much about it besides they got a tough job.

Q. How would you sum up this season? All of the adversity, you had some very great moments, then to see your team fight till the final second, suffer that heartbreak at the end?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, I am super proud of our players. I mean, super proud. They are highly competitive. They want to win. They don't like this emotion of losing.

But every single time we've lost, and I'm just going to talk

about the two-year span. We lost to Indiana last year in the first month of the season, then we never lost again. Then we come into this season, and we lose our fifth game of the season. But every single time that we've had a setback, we've gotten better.

It's unfortunate that this setback will be an entire off-season, but we will get better. We will get better. We can arm ourselves with what we need to reverse us losing basketball games in this moment, in the way that we did.

I am proud. I am honored to coach our basketball team. And I look forward to getting back to the biggest stage of women's college basketball.

Q. A comment about Zia. She had 25 tonight. Three turnovers. That's what she was upset with after the game, which says a lot about her. Talk about her performance tonight, how special you think she is.

DAWN STALEY: I mean, Zia is built for the biggest stage, the biggest stage. She was up to play. Shots were falling for her. I mean, she got great looks. She created great looks. She's probably a little down on the turnover late in the fourth quarter.

Those instances, they'll be good teaching tools. But she put us in a position to win a basketball game with some of the things that she did for us on both sides of the basketball.

Proud of her. She'll come back a much better basketball player because her trajectory is headed in the right direction. So we look forward to, again, her being on this stage and her performing the way she did.

Q. It didn't come out in the wash, but Destanni's shot, did you get a good look at that? What does it say about her to step up and make that shot?

DAWN STALEY: Destanni, I mean, she's a gamer. She played every minute of this basketball game besides, what, 50, 40, 32 seconds. We need her on the floor.

I just wish she would have shot a little bit sooner. Shoot in the first half. Shoot in the first quarter. Shoot in the second quarter. She has a beautiful shot.

I'm glad she shot when she shot and gave us an opportunity to win. She put us up by one, we just couldn't close the deal.

Q. How do you want this team at South Carolina to be remembered 10, 20 years from now?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, of course I want to be remembered as being one of the best teams in college basketball. But in order for us to do that, we have to win. We have to win national championships.

Q. May be hard to think about this, but what about the excitement factor of this tournament? This game went down to the wire. We've had some other ones in this tournament. It's been a really high entertainment factor, if you will. What does that mean, especially this year when so much attention has been given to the fact that the women's game hasn't gotten a fair shake in a lot of ways?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, we put a product on the floor that if you give us a chance, you can be proud of. The casual fan, the dad that likes to sit on the couch and watch sports all day, to the young, to the old.

When you find you a team, you find you a women's basketball team, and you support them in a way that you support whatever is your favorite team, you'll find that your team is probably a pretty darn good basketball team. Then the people they play, their opponents, you'll fall in love with our game because our game is a beautiful game.

Also women who can flat out shoot the ball, create space for rebounding, dribble the basketball. Some of the plays that Zia made, most men can't make that play. That snatch back, crossover-dribble pullup, most men can't do that, and you saw that today.

You saw Haley Jones play an incredible game, out there driving the ball to the basket, hitting game-winning jumpers. You saw us fight back from six down to put ourselves in a position, get a steal and go in for a layup. We missed it. Aliyah Boston has the gall to chase it down and give us a shot as a putback.

All the things that happen in any game played on any court. But sometimes we have a willingness to just look at women and think we can't play. Well, you're missing out. You're missing out on some great basketball.

Q. I wanted to circle back to something you said earlier. You actually hit more three-pointers than Stanford. Was that kind of surprising to you? Was that part of the game plan? How excited are you by that, you can shoot threes, too?

DAWN STALEY: You look at the entire stat sheet. We actually get more offensive rebounds than them, but they score a third of their points from offensive rebounding.

I mean, we shoot the heck out of the three. I mean, I knew

we would be in a position to hold them from attempting three-point baskets. That is what gave us an opportunity to win.

I felt like if we allowed them to shoot their threes, we couldn't generate enough two-points. But we held. It was a direct opposite.

I'm proud of our team. We took great shots. We disrupted a team that usually scores are a little bit more points, scores a little bit more from three. The game plan was beautifully executed. We just couldn't put enough points on the scoreboard.

Q. Did Stanford pretty much play the way you expected? Is there anything that surprised you? You had a great game plan, sometimes you just don't win.

DAWN STALEY: I mean, they played their game. I mean, they backdoored us a few times. We ran them off the three-point line. We knew that was going to take place. We knew they would have counters to it.

I just thought that Haley Jones was a problem for us. She is a guard. We had our post players match up with her most of the night. She took advantage of that. I thought when they went big, put her at the three, I thought it was a perfect matchup for Brea Beal. I thought Brea Beal did a great job on it except we couldn't come up with an offensive rebound on one of their last possessions.

I just thought it was a great executed game on both sides of the ball. We lost the way we did, and it's heartbreaking.

Q. As you look towards next season, with a lot of the returning core coming back, how excited are you to get back in and get prepared for an upcoming season? I know you don't like to lose. How exciting is to it have the majority of the team returning next year?

DAWN STALEY: I mean, we look forward to having our team back. We look forward to off-season workouts. Obviously we got to give them a week off, we'll get back into the swing of things to see if we can get a week or two in post-season to work on some things.

But this team is a together team, is a team that gets along extremely well. We'll bring in some young pups and hopefully they can help us create the competitiveness, the environment that we need to compete at this level.

I so look forward to it.

Q. I know you wanted it to be you guys who were thinking about Sunday night. With Tara getting the



chance Sunday night in a year where she kind of set the all-time record, you talk about how she's been an influence in the past. There's got to be some good feelings about that when you think of the whole picture.

DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I mean, Tara has been in this game. She's given her entire life to women's basketball. Her being the winningest coach is only indicative of what work she's put into it.

She's a savant when it comes to this game. It's taken 25 years for her to get back in this position to compete for a national championship. I think 29 years ago it was -- well, we lost to them in the semifinals just like we lost to them today. I was hoping that we could somehow send her home.

She lives for another game. I'm sure she'll be prepared for Arizona or UConn.

Q. You said earlier that Aliyah will probably think about that missed shot for the rest of her life. From your experience, what can you do as a coach to help her move on or at least try to move on and compartmentalize, realize there's more basketball to be played?

DAWN STALEY: You got to replace it with other great moments. Aliyah is wired that way for a reason. She's a perfectionist. She is one that really studies the game and thinks about the game. She holds herself to a higher standard. That's not part of her standard. So that's why it hurt so much, because it's something that she practices all the time.

But it wasn't in the cards. We'll talk to her and try to get her to move off of it. She won't because she's just wired like that. I don't think it will impact her if she's in that situation. I don't think she would change her shot if she thought, Oh, I can miss this. She's not that type of player that's going to allow that shot to impact her next shot, her next move in the journey that she has in basketball.

But when she's back in her room, she's going to cry. I know it. She's going to cry. She's going to cry a whole lot. But when it's time for us to pick back up and get back on the court in a couple of weeks, she'll move on.

Q. You've been through heartbreak before as a player in that position. How long did it take you to kind of grieve or mourn over that game, get past it?

DAWN STALEY: I'm going to say this before I answer your question. I just want to thank Lynn Holzman, the

committee, NCAA committee, all of San Antonio for hosting us and making us feel special while we were here. Thank the state troopers who got us to the gym, wherever we needed to be. And all the organizers that helped put this tournament on.

I know we're in a pandemic. I know that we had to bubble up in a hotel. But it certainly felt like a Final Four when we were everywhere besides in our rooms, which is a really cool thing.

To answer your question, I mean, there are plays in my career that I think about. I mean, 29 years ago when we lost to Stanford in the Final Four. The officials called the game off. I thought there was more time. They ran in the tunnel. I ran after them, say, C'mon back, you got to look and see, there's more time left on the clock. They put more time on the clock. We played that 0.8 seconds. We're down by one, I believe. In that instance, they put a fresh body on me, someone that didn't play the entire game. She came out. Angela Taylor, she was just fresh.

I'm thinking, Okay, well, I broke away from her and just heaved up a shot. I thought about it. I'm like, I could have gotten her to foul me. She's so fresh and gung-ho about denying me the basketball, I should have started my breakout and stopped. She would have just actually ran me over. I could have just kind of lied down and faked a foul and went to the free-throw line.

So that stays with me. That's 29 years later. But from 29 years ago to now, I mean, there are so many great memories that replace that. It only comes up when I'm asked.

Aliyah will get over it. Aliyah is a great player. Aliyah will come back stronger, better. If she's ever put in this position again, she'll knock it down.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time this evening. Congratulations on a great season. Look forward to seeing you here next year.

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