

NCAA Women's Regional Semifinals and Finals: Albany

Sunday, March 25, 2018
Albany, New York



Dawn Staley
Tyasha Harris
Alexis Jennings
Doniyah Cliney
Bianca Jackson
A'Ja Wilson
South Carolina

COACH DAWN STALEY: Excited to be a part of the Elite 8. We're looking forward to the challenge of playing a really good UCONN team. I just hope there are a lot of people in the stands to create an atmosphere like they did -- on Saturday morning.

Q. A'Ja, I read your place in the players tribune that was released yesterday on your battle with dyslexia. Why do you feel this was the time to release that and how important do you feel that piece is now?

A'JA WILSON: I just kind of felt like it was the right time to release it. This is a period in my life -- this is where my collegiate career is slowing coming to an end, and I just felt deep down in my heart that it was okay for the world to know what I was battling with.

What was the second part of your question? I'm so sorry.

Q. How important do you feel that piece is for others to know?

A'JA WILSON: Oh, man, it's lifted a lot of weight off my shoulders for people to understand, and I think it's a great feeling because it now shows people I am still human.

I think people tend to get caught up in the Basketball A'Ja and not understand that there's a whole other side that they have never really seen or met before. I think it's a great feeling for people to now understand that it's real. It's real, such as mental illness, such as a

learning disability.

Some people out here, they don't have a clue what we go through. So to show that side of me and have people see a different look and always see there's a different side to a student athlete, I think it's something good. I see the Tweets from people saying that they go through it, as well, and it's also good to know that you are not alone in it.

Q. It seems like even though you guys are the defending national champions, all eyes are on UCONN, and they are the favorites. Does that feel a little disrespectful?

A'JA WILSON: I don't feel like it's disrespectful. I feel like we've been the underdogs this whole season and my whole four years here, honestly, so it's not a different feeling from any other game. We're just blessed to be here playing in the Elite 8 and we're just going to stay with it. I think it's more about us than anything and we make it about us. So it doesn't really matter what's going on on the outside world. It's really just what's going on in our circle.

TYASHA HARRIS: Like what A'Ja said, I like being the underdog because I like proving people wrong. We just have to stay within us and stay focused and locked in.

Q. Last year there were comments that said that because you didn't beat UCONN, the title didn't mean as much. When you heard that, what was your reaction to it?

A'JA WILSON: I don't know about the other two, but I just laughed. You can't take my banner away from me. You can't take my ring away from me. You can't take away the journey that we took to get there. I really didn't pay it any mind.

TYASHA HARRIS: I laughed, as well. Everybody took the same path and everybody had to fight through each game one by one, and we just happened to make it to the last game. We still have the banner and ring to prove it, so that's it.

Q. You've pretty much accomplished everything but the one thing you haven't done is beat UCONN. A, is that a stat that you really look at which how personal is tomorrow's game and how much do

you want to accomplish that?

A'JA WILSON: I can't really look at it. I don't think it's very personal. I mean, this is just another game. This is another game that I would like to win. I mean, there's nothing much more to it. I don't really look at the opponent in a different way. Just staying within my system. I'm lucky to be playing alongside of these great girls and am enjoying my collegiate career.

Q. For Ty and Bianca, 26 turnovers in your game yesterday, that won't go well against UCONN, so what is the plan to change that?

TYASHA HARRIS: We have to just be conscious of where we're passing the ball and know where we're going to pass it before anything happens and just be aware, and not be lackadaisical while we're doing it. But if we do turn it over, we have to defend our turnovers and try to make it dead ball turnovers and not live ball.

BIANCA JACKSON: For me, just making sure passes. Know where I'm going to go with the ball before I pick it up and look out on the whole court before I make a decision where to put the ball.

Q. How are you looking forward to your rematch with Gabby Williams in particular? She was guarding you most of the game last time out.

A'JA WILSON: It is what it is. It's a matchup, of course but honestly it's not something like, oh, can't wait but at the same time I'm not going to overlook Gabby. She's a great player and great defender and very athletic. I'm going to take it in, do what I can and trust my teammates.

Q. UCONN beat you by 25 back in February. How has this team improved, so that won't happen again on Monday night?

A'JA WILSON: How have we improved -- I think -- I think we have a lot more contribution from everyone. I think everybody's confidence has increased and just the growth of this team has gotten a lot better since February. I think the SEC Tournament kind of really showed that and that's good. We need that going in, especially being in this tournament and not necessarily playing against UCONN, but just in this tournament as a whole.

I think we just grew our confidence. I think our young ones really have grown up in different ways mentally, and that's what you need. So I think the biggest thing is just our growth. Our growth is something that we've really grown.

ALEXIS JENNINGS: I agree with A'Ja but last game I feel like we didn't utilize our post presence and coming off a game like yesterday against Buffalo, I feel like we

have the confidence now going forward and we can use that and that can be another key to get the win.

Q. Doniyah, when you guys were going into the SEC Final against Mississippi State, everybody is saying, Oh, they are undefeated and Mississippi State is going to win, and your strategy, you were preaching you wanted to keep the score close and make them uncomfortable and put them in pressure situations. How is the strategy similar for tomorrow night's game?

DONIYAH CLINEY: I think we just play within our system. It's not really like, you know, just make them uncomfortable as like Mississippi State because they're two different teams.

Obviously Gabby Williams is not as tall as Teaira McCowan, but she's more athletic. So we just have to be smarter and like just move A'Ja, maybe make her come to the high post more or just keep her in the paint because obviously she has the height advantage. Just be smarter.

Q. Bianca, when you came in, sometimes freshmen have to wait their turn but you were put right into the game and have played a lot this year, did you think that you would play as much as you have this year and how do you think you've done?

BIANCA JACKSON: I came in with the mindset that I wanted to put myself in a position to be able to play this year. Even though I had some injuries that put me in the spotlight coming in starting as a freshman, but I think I did pretty well this season. You know, I feel like I held my own.

Q. Bianca, I had a question for you also. What's it like to grow up with your parents both coaching, and do they give you a lot of advice or how is that relationship?

BIANCA JACKSON: In my household it was basketball all the time, both coaching, that was pretty much the topic of conversation all the time. My mom used to coach me during my high school game, she would coach me all the time.

Now that I'm in college she kind of steps back sometimes. But the night before the game, she will call me and say, "I want to talk to you about a couple things I think you need to work on." It's good. They are in my corner. They are here for me when I'm feeling down or when I need to be picked up. They are always here to support me, so it's good.

Q. A'Ja and Alexis, 12 national championships between these two programs. Does it feel kind of like a National Championship atmosphere? Does it feel like the premiere women's college basketball

matchup to you guys?

A'JA WILSON: Go ahead, Lex.

ALEXIS JENNINGS: You got it.

A'JA WILSON: Yeah, you've got the defending champs versus the ones been keeping the trophy in the case for a while. It definitely does feel like one of those games and I think Albany has a great atmosphere. It's a lot of blue up here.

But to see just a packed house like this, it shows how the growth of the game has changed and that's something that we want and if UCONN and South Carolina is a big game matchup that brings people together to watch the game, hey, we are going to do our best to stay within our system and play it.

ALEXIS JENNINGS: I pretty much agree with A'Ja.

Q. Tie, going off what we're seeing right now, you're known for having a lot of fun off the court. You joke around a lot. But when does the fun kind of stop and when do the game faces come on during tournament time in?

TYASHA HARRIS: This is for me, right? The fun part, we start -- once we -- it doesn't really stop but we hide it a little bit. But Coach Staley always tells us to have fun and just enjoy the game, because you don't know when it's going to be your last. Any time can be just unpredictable. We try to lower it down once we step into the court, but as you could see, like right before we run out, we also dance. It doesn't really stop.

Q. Alexis mentioned it a little bit about the last UCONN game where she didn't feel the post game got going outside of Asia. After coming off such a big game where the post did well against Buffalo, how do you plan to exploit that momentum going against UCONN?

COACH DAWN STALEY: Our plan is always to go inside first and continue to go inside first. We make that an emphasis to get the ball in the paint, and that won't stop. Now that we're playing, Alexis will get the ball, Alexis got to finish; A'Ja will get the ball, A'Ja got to finish; Kiki's going to get the ball, Kiki's got to finish. We will continue to pound it in, and they have been extremely productive for us all year long. You go where the numbers say to go, and it points to going inside.

Q. Simple question but I don't know if it's a simple answer: How do you beat UCONN?

COACH DAWN STALEY: You've got to play the game. You've got to play the game. He's an amazing guy -- I've got to tell you this story because I was walking out after scouting UCONN yesterday, and I guess a

UCONN fan, he started yelling at me, like, you know, you're -- Monday -- like giving me the thumb's up. I actually think it was a Gamecock fan and I turned around and almost gave him thumb's up. So I don't know why this came to me, but this came to me.

I said, "On Monday night, you're going to believe there's a God," and that's what we're going to go with. That's what we're going to go with.

Q. How concerned are you with the turnovers yesterday and is your team maybe not as sharp as it was during the conference tournament? Does that concern you going into such a big game?

COACH DAWN STALEY: Well, we actually are very consistent at the conference tournament in that we turn the ball over a great deal. I think, you've got to raise your eyebrows because it's not that, you know, they are -- turnovers that we can control.

It's not like we were being pressured. It wasn't like all game long. They were sitting back in a sagging match-up zone and we just played too fast. We just need to slow down, keep our composure and find the hands that the ball should go in.

I think sometimes we get overzealous and we try to force things. We try to go a little bit quicker than we want to go, because we see where there are lanes to exploit. So hopefully we'll slow down a little bit and take better care of the ball, because if we don't, we'll get ran out of the gym.

Q. Through the years, coming up as a player, then your long friendship with Tonya, seeing Geno through a prism, and you've worked with him through the Olympics and you got to deal with him up close and personal. Can you talk about your view points over the years and what you saw?

COACH DAWN STALEY: You hear stories about Geno. Obviously I worked with him last summer and also had a chance to work with him in the 2000 Olympic Games, and Tonya used to work for them I think for 16 years. So you hear about all these stories about how he has a great basketball mind, and he definitely does. He has an incredible mind for the game. I think there's great opportunities to learn from him.

But at the same time, that's his style. You have to take some of the good that you can implement with your team, but that's his style. That's not really my style but it works for him and I think he's done a great job with just owning college women's basketball, and hopefully we can cut us a slice Monday night.

Q. In A'Ja's piece that released yesterday, you talked about how you had her read Scripture in

front of the team. Why do you feel that was good for her to do that in front of her peers and colleagues and what was it like for you to read that piece?

COACH DAWN STALEY: I think with anything, I try to hit my challenges head-on and I try to bring that type of mentality to our players. I think A'Ja, in dealing with dyslexia, you always think that you're less than; you always think you're a little bit different than everybody else because you don't pick up on things as quickly. Your processes are just a little bit different.

I wanted her to face one of her challenges head on, and reading our Scripture for each and every game, and she got to the point where -- she made mistakes at times, and A'Ja will tell you that she laughs at a lot of mistakes that she makes when it comes to dyslexia, and we laugh with her.

But we also are there to encourage her to continue because she is a beacon of hope for someone else, a beacon of hope not just as a talented, skilled basketball player, but also as someone that deals with dyslexia every day.

Q. Could you talk about Chrystal Dangerfield's development as a point guard for UCONN? What do you see that you like from her?

COACH DAWN STALEY: What I see that I like is she's under Geno's spell, and when you give yourself to your coach, you're going to look a lot better than what you think it should look like.

So I think she is someone that's extremely talented, probably more talented than what you're seeing, but she's learning another side of how to play the game, so she can have longevity in our sport once she becomes a professional basketball player.

Q. Did you see Felisha's comments yesterday about how difficult it is for African American coaches to get a second chance, and your thoughts on that?

COACH DAWN STALEY: Yeah, I did see her comments, and she nailed it. I think any time you're in this profession as an African American woman, man, you have to be successful out the gate. If you're not successful, you have to go back, and fortunately for me, I didn't go through the ranks of being a grad assistant and assistant coach up through there. I was given an opportunity because somebody saw something in me that I didn't see in myself.

But for other coaches who have assisted for so many years and got the opportunity, like Jolette Law who is on our staff, she was an assistant for, I don't know, 12 to 15 years, and then she got an opportunity at Illinois.

It takes awhile to get a program off the ground, especially a dormant program, and people want you to be great, you know, from the start. It takes a very long time. It takes patience. It takes an AD that has that patience. When I got the job at South Carolina, the AD was Eric Hyman, and he was like, "It's going to take you at least three years, at least three years."

I didn't believe him because I just feel like, if you work hard and you do things the right way, things are going to happen for you quickly. And he was very right because he knew what was there. I think when you take over a program, you know, you've got to know what's there.

Basketball coaches, you've got to know what you're going into, and you can't think you're invincible to having bad seasons. It has to be the right fit and you have to have people in there who believe in you and have the patience enough to give you an opportunity, and if you fail -- because most coaches have failed.

If you looked at all the coaches, both black, white, you know, and any other ethnic group, they failed at some point. And they probably have gotten opportunities. Those things don't happen a lot for African American coaches. But, you know, Felisha, she is probably the poster child for that, and I'm glad that she was given an opportunity to right the wrong, because there is nothing worse than losing a challenge and not being able to regroup and win that challenge.

I hope that my success is a beacon of hope for other black coaches and also a beacon of hope to other ADs, to see that given an opportunity, you can win a National Championship like we did.

Q. You mentioned not only this year when you played UCONN, but the past year you played UCONN, how crucial it is to keep them from going on a run, not score eight or ten points in a row. Have you mentioned that again to the team as they prepare for this one?

COACH DAWN STALEY: Yeah, UCONN makes you pay a lot of different ways. If you turn the ball over, you know, they are going to make you pay. If you miss a shot and it comes off the rim, they are going to rebound and push it and make you pay.

If you make a basket and you are slow to get back, they will make you pay. So there's a lot of different ways in which they make you pay. I think our players are very aware of the style of play and what UCONN does best.

I think it also helps that we've played them over the past few years, and you can't just play them one game

and think you're going to have success. You have to have the experience of playing them in a lot of different ways, at home, away at their place, and then we're playing on a neutral site, something that we haven't done. Hopefully this is the trick.

Q. Based on what you've seen through UCONN with your earlier matchup and your scouting, what challenges does UCONN present to you?

COACH DAWN STALEY: They are just a team that's on a mission. I think they are probably more hungry than they have ever been because they didn't win a National Championship last year.

But also, that also puts them in a place in which you know is unfamiliar to them because they are used to being the defending National Champions and I think someone asked one of our other players a question about doing what we did to Mississippi State, which is to keep it close and put them in unfamiliar situations that they haven't been in a lot this season.

You have to put them in those situations. You have to keep the game close and hopefully, you know, something else kicks in to where they are not as sharp as they normally are.

Q. It seemed like yesterday you were running with some combination of three forwards on the floor a lot, and Lydia was talking about being more comfortable as a guard and just being in the perimeter like that. How much, especially given how size is one of the areas where you have an advantage over UCONN, how much are we going to see that on the floor tomorrow?

COACH DAWN STALEY: We've been playing the big lineup ever since the SEC Tournament. I think Lydia is getting more and more accustomed to playing on the perimeter and she gives us speed and she gives us another passer, another ball handler. And she's fearless, as fearless can be. We will definitely play that lineup at some point and utilize her quickness and her ability to take people off the dribble.