

**March 8, 2015**



South Carolina – 62  
Tennessee – 46

An interview with:

**COACH DAWN STALEY  
TIFFANY MITCHELL  
ALEIGHSA WELCH**

THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by South Carolina head coach and student-athletes Aleighsa Welch and Tiffany Mitchell.

Questions.

**Q. Dawn, from where South Carolina was when you took over till now, can you just explain the joy in finally toppling Tennessee and becoming the league's new elite program?**

COACH STALEY: I mean, it feels good. It feels pretty good to be where we are today because we still feel every bit of seven years ago, six years ago when we were just trying to jump-start the program.

These are the times in which we look forward to, we envision sitting here today being SEC tournament champions. It feels great.

**Q. Aleighsa, for how low the team felt last week at Kentucky, winning today, describe the difference of emotion, and the fact you earned MVP honors.**

ALEIGHSA WELCH: It's kind of hard to put the excitement into words. This is a goal we set for ourselves at the beginning of the season. Coming in off of a loss, three games in three days, it's not easy. For everybody to kind of lock down, put their mental focus in, it pays off. Moments like this, it's really hard to explain.

As far as the MVP, it means a lot to me. I wasn't expecting to get it. I'm thankful. But I owe a lot of it to my teammates, especially picking me up when I was down when I missed a couple easy ones. It was a team effort and I just appreciate it.

**Q. Aleighsa, when the game was still close, seems like you were getting your hands on every offensive rebound. Like you said before, it's not about the talent it's about the want. How much did you want to get those boards?**

ALEIGHSA WELCH: I wanted every rebound that came of the boards, offensively or defensively. I made sure that I attempted to go for every rebound. That's something I just love to do. I knew we needed offensive boards. My goal was just to attack the boards, attack the glass every time a shot went up.

Offensive rebounds is all about effort.

**Q. Coach and Tiffany, you held them to 46 points, an SEC low. What was the key today?**

COACH STALEY: I think the key is coming into a tournament like this, that is important. I thought Tennessee played a lot of minutes last night against Kentucky. For us, we were probably a lot fresher because we were able to use a lot of different people over the past three days.

We just tried to keep fresh legs on them. We tried to contest all of their shots. We just tried to make them work extremely hard for everything that they got.

Fortunately for us our defense did the job tonight and won us a tournament championship.

TIFFANY MITCHELL: She took the words right out of my mouth (laughter). I was going to say the exact same thing.

**Q. In regards to your defense, did you do anything differently? Tennessee got better shots, made more of them in the game in Columbia. Did you change up anything at all?**

COACH STALEY: The one adjustment, just coming into the tournament, we knew it would help us throughout the three games that we would play, just the people we would face, is to go back to the basics of help and recover, help the helper. Just really went back to the basics of our defense.

We knew we would give up some open looks, but we just didn't want to give up sure twos

versus contested threes. I thought we did a really good job at executing that.

**Q. Lisa, Tiffany hasn't been around four years yet, so this is for you. You've been around this program for a long time. You've been waiting for this moment. Now that it's happened, can you describe it considering the ups and downs you've gone through as a player.**

ALEIGHSA WELCH: It's something that was talked to me, Coach Staley talked to me about it when I was being recruited. The first year, the excitement we had, making it to the Sweet 16, to now winning the SEC tournament championship, everything about this season has kind of just had little check points that I can mark off things I wanted to accomplish while I've been here.

It means that much more to me to happen during my senior year, during a year in which a lot of firsts are going on this season.

But looking back when she came to my home visit, some of the stuff we talked about till now, it means a lot that there were a lot of things on that list that have been accomplished so far.

**Q. Tiffany, can you describe where you feel this team can go now confidence-wise. Does a win like this today give you the absolute most confidence that you can cross off that biggest goal on your checklist, which is winning a national championship?**

TIFFANY MITCHELL: I think this win today was a big confidence booster. It's a great momentum leading up into the NCAA tournament.

I think we're in a good place right now. We're going to have a good push in the tournament.

**Q. Tiffany, when you were looking for some scores today, Sessions really stepped up. She hadn't scored much early on in the tournament, talk about her sparkplug for you today on the offensive end.**

TIFFANY MITCHELL: We know how teams play Khadijah. The whole season they kind of sag off of her, kind of force her to make those shots. She's been getting in the gym, taking practice shots. Just knocked them down, she had the confidence to shoot them.

**Q. In the first half when Graves had to sit with two fouls, what were you thinking at halftime? Did you think it was a lost opportunity or were you still confident?**

COACH STALEY: I felt we did not take advantage of having such a big offensive threat in Graves being in foul trouble. We also didn't play our best basketball.

We didn't score as many points in the paint where I thought we had our advantage. But I was still encouraged because the defense was holding up. To hold Tennessee to 26 points is pretty darn good. If your defense is working as well as it was, I felt confident that coming down the stretch we could get some good looks at the basket.

**Q. Tiffany and Aleighsa, as big a deal as it is winning the SEC tournament, does it make it better you beat the established power in the league? Tennessee has won 17 of these tournaments.**

ALEIGHSA WELCH: It's always big for you to kind of know you've established your program when you've been able to beat a team of Tennessee's caliber, especially twice in a season and a game like this where so much is on the line.

Like I said, you have the utmost respect for the program they've established and they've had for a very long time. But our focus was on us, doing what we had to do.

No matter who we played today, we wanted to make sure we came out and did what we needed to do to win.

**Q. Coach, you hugged your staff with 45 seconds left in the game. Talk about what you were feeling in that moment, what this championship means to South Carolina, and what's next.**

COACH STALEY: I mean, I hugged them because they pretty much do all the work. They do all the dirty work to get our team prepared for teams in this league. That is not an easy feat.

I just wanted to embrace them and let them know that this moment occurred because of them. For us, our staff has been together for so long. I think that helps when you have continuity on staff, you work as a family. You win as a family, you lose as a family. This is probably one of the biggest wins that we've ever had as a staff. We just wanted to enjoy that moment.

**Q. Tiffany, yesterday probably wasn't your best day. Today was just as good as yesterday might have been challenging. Was that something different or a difference in the looks you were allowed?**

TIFFANY MITCHELL: I mean, yesterday was probably one of the worst games I've had wearing a South Carolina jersey.

My teammates did a great job encouraging me and telling me to stay the course. Coach Staley told me to stop thinking so much and play basketball. Coach McCray worked with me before the game getting some extra shots.

My preparation was a little bit different than yesterday's.

**Q. Aleighsa, now comes the time where you, especially as a senior, it's win or it's over. How much will that drive you once you start playing in the big tournament?**

ALEIGHSA WELCH: There's not going to be a game we play where I don't give all that I have as far as effort, doing everything I can do to possibly will my team to a win.

Like you said, now it is win or go home. You can't afford to have a bad game. You can't afford to not prepare the right way leading up to a game.

For me as a senior, kind of just still wanting to savor the moment, there won't be a time when I step on the court where I'm not giving 150% for my team and laying it all out on the line.

**Q. Aleighsa, how do you feel how you ended the game?**

ALEIGHSA WELCH: Most definitely. It gave us a lot of confidence going into halftime, to be able to go on that run. Kind of a momentum shift. Before that we were down by five. To be able to go on that run leading into halftime, the energy was up in the locker room. There was a lot more talking.

I think it fed off into the second half as far as we were still able to keep that momentum when we came out. It was really important for us to go on that run and keep that momentum going into halftime.

**Q. Coach, from your perspective, talk about what Aleighsa has meant to this program, how she's factored into this turnaround.**

COACH STALEY: Aleighsa has been a mainstay. It's almost hard to believe that it's already been four years. What you've seen is someone who has grown into a leadership position because she wasn't always that. But that's what you want to instill in young people when they come into your program. You want to give them tools that they'll be able to use out in the real world.

Obviously the platform for her to lead our basketball team was a great feat for her. But we still hopefully got a lot of basketball left in us. She has been one that if you look at our Kentucky game, she was under the weather, she wasn't able to give us the effort and energy she usually gives us. It was felt throughout our entire team.

Then she comes into a tournament like this and gives it to us. We become SEC champions. That's a really hard, hard thing when you're a leader and you're expected to bring it every single night, even when you're under the weather. It's hard on the team when it's not there.

I hope she can see that. So she means that much to our basketball team. It can be a defeat if she doesn't bring what she normally brings to our team.

You don't want a player to have that much power. But when they understand it and they bring it, beautiful things can happen.

**Q. Coach, do you measure the progress of your program against a traditional power like Tennessee? If so, where are you at on that path?**

COACH STALEY: I mean, if you look at history, it's not anywhere near where we feel real good coming into each game. I think we've beat them I think this is the third time.

**Q. Fourth ever.**

COACH STALEY: Fourth ever in 30 years.

I mean, but I think when you go up against such a traditional powerhouse like Tennessee, you need opportunities to play them. You got to continue to play them. The more you play them, the more you'll be able to chip away at some of the things they're really good at.

You get more and more talented players like they have 'cause you can't win on out-working them because they'll out-talent you every single night.

We've been kind of able to even the playing field where it doesn't come down to us having to play perfect basketball.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, coach, thank you.

COACH STALEY: Thank you.

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