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Goose Creek's Welch a coach on the floor for top-ranked USC



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COLUMBIA - The ball spun around the rim and off, and despite being fouled, the missed layup left Alaina Coates looking up at the ceiling and rolling her eyes in exasperation. The first person there was Aleighsa Welch, who placed her hands on her teammate's shoulders and delivered a dose of reassurance on the short walk to the free throw line.

It was a small moment early in a tight game that would become a 21-point victory for the top-ranked South Carolina women's basketball team. But those small moments are where Welch excels, every bit as much as she does under the basket. Dawn Staley may be USC's unquestioned leader, with now 300 career victories to her credit, but the senior forward from Goose Creek is the Gamecocks' coach on the floor.

"I don't know what we're going to do when we lose Aleighsa next year," said Staley, USC's head coach. "We're not going to have her in practice, we're not going to have her leading us

on and off the floor. ... It's going to be hard shoes to fill, because she's like a coach. She's like a coach on and off the floor. Our young players are improving because she's a constant. She's always talking. She's always talking to them, she's always encouraging them, she's always there for them. And you want that in a senior and in a leader."

It's been that way since well before Welch was a senior. During a loss at Auburn her freshman season, Staley pulled her aside in a time out and delivered a mandate that would alter Welch's role at USC. "I need you to lead this team," she told her. Staley knew that would be asking a lot of a freshman, but she also thought the vocal and energetic Welch had the ability to handle it.

"Ever since then, I've kind of accepted the fact that I knew I was going to be in this position," Welch said, "and tried to prepare myself for it."

That leadership is bolstered by her performance on the court, where Welch is an All-SEC player averaging 9.9 points and 4.9 rebounds entering Sunday's game at No. 9 Duke. But it also manifests itself in other ways, whether it's shouting encouragement from the bench - with such gusto, Welch is bent over in her chair with both hands on the floor - or reassuring the sophomore Coates after a missed layup, or challenging freshman A'ja Wilson to fight through fatigue late in a victory over No. 22 Syracuse in the Bahamas.

"She had to learn each person and how to talk to different people," Wilson said. "Because especially females, we take things differently. You can't talk to one person the same way you talk to another. It is hard sometimes, because when you're in the moment, you want to say, 'Come on, you've got to get that pass,' or something. But she does find a balance to where she knows how to be a leader and not really be a boss."

It's all been building toward this season, as USC (7-0) mixes five returning starters with five heralded freshmen on a team aiming for the Final Four. When she made her official visit, Wilson said Welch quickly became "like my big sister." With so many strong players vying for minutes, lineups and roles are often in flux. For the freshmen, Welch is always there, whether it's to offer a bit of advice on the court or counsel in the dorm.

"Aleighsa is very open, and she makes you feel comfortable," said freshman Jatarie White. "That's why I've opened up to her more, because when I'm having a down day or something

isn't going right, she'll just come to you and say, 'What's going on? What's wrong?' And it's easy for me to open up to her, because I know she understands, and I know she's been through it."

It helps that Welch can adjust her style, understanding which teammates respond best to a supportive tone, and which can handle her getting in their face. To the Goose Creek native, it's all part of maintaining team chemistry, which translates to better play on the court.

"I see it as my biggest accomplishment, yet my toughest challenge. Because we do have so many young players and so many players who are able to contribute. Sometimes, you just have to be that voice of reason for everybody, and that's what I try to be. I try to be somebody who can level out everything to make them see both sides of it," Welch said.

"I think it molds our team chemistry. At the end of the day, when you have a personal relationship with everybody on your team, it shows because you're able to have fun on the court together."

If this all sounds like someone destined to be a coach - well, Welch has heard that before. "She's a natural born leader," Staley said. Welch almost certainly has a future in the WNBA, where some have projected her as a first-round draft pick. But perhaps after her playing days are over?

"I can see it," Wilson said. "I can see her stressed out a little bit being a coach. But I can see it."

As far as Welch is concerned, that can wait. "I think about it, I really do. But right now, my main focus is trying to be another coach to them," she said, referring to her teammates. "Not putting myself on that pedestal, because I'm still their teammate, but I just want to let them know what I see."

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