

Senior Welch delivers in a big way for USC women

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South Carolina's Aleighsa Welch had scored only 12 points and attempted just 14 field goals in the three games leading up to Monday's showdown with No. 6 Tennessee. With USC playing arguably its biggest game of the year against the Vols, Welch knew she had to come ready to play, and she did.



Rainier Ehrhardt/AP

South Carolina forward Aleighsa Welch, right, is fouled by Tennessee's Jaime Nared during the Gamecocks' 71-66 victory on Monday night in Columbia.

The senior was aggressive throughout the contest and played one of the best games of her career, scoring 19 points on 9-for-14 shooting and pulling down a game-high 14 rebounds to lead USC to a win and keep the Gamecocks atop the SEC standings.

Welch added two assists, a block and a steal, while her nine offensive rebounds were more than any other USC player had total rebounds.

"I knew me, personally, coming into the game, I wanted to be more aggressive than I've been," Welch said. "The previous games leading up to this I've been really passive. I haven't been my usual self as far as aggression."

Even with Welch making minimal contributions in the three games leading up to Monday night, the Gamecocks still easily dismissed LSU, Vanderbilt and Arkansas with the closest contest decided by 17 points.

But without Welch's strong game Monday night, the Gamecocks would have had no shot against the Volunteers.

"I knew that this was a big game for us," Welch said. "No matter if it was hustle plays, getting a key rebound, steals, blocks, points, whatever it was, I just wanted to make sure in some way, shape or form to have a positive impact in every play."

Tennessee forward Cierra Burdick, who scored 16 points and added 10 rebounds for the Volunteers, said Welch was the difference in the game.

"Welch had a heck of a game, 19 points, 14 boards. I've got a lot of healthy respect for her as a ball player," Burdick said. "She knows her strengths, she knows her role, and she plays to them."

With South Carolina trying to hold off a late Tennessee rally, Welch grabbed two offensive rebounds in the final three minutes that allowed the Gamecocks to run time off the clock in a 71-66 win.

"She came out with a certain focus and determination to not let us lose this game," USC coach Dawn Staley said. "She played like it every minute that she was on the floor. When she wasn't on the floor she was cheering and willing our team to a

victory.”

The win was only South Carolina's third all-time against Tennessee and the first home victory for USC over the Volunteers since 1980.

The Gamecocks were 1-42 against Tennessee when Welch arrived at South Carolina, but the senior forward now has two wins over the Volunteers and may have a chance for a third in the SEC tournament or NCAA tournament.

She said earning a couple of wins over Tennessee is a special accomplishment.

“It means a lot to me to be able to say that and to be able to have one win my freshman year and one win my senior year. It's a big deal,” she said. “It just adds to the things that I can kind of check off my bucket list since I've been here. ... When you do get a win over a great Tennessee program like that it means a lot, especially knowing that I'm on two of the squads that have been able to do it.”

The Gamecocks have a chance to capture at least a share of the SEC title with a win over No. 11 Mississippi State Thursday night. A victory would give South Carolina back-to-back SEC titles.

Staley said that while the win over Tennessee was sweet, her team must come ready to play against the Bulldogs.

“It's the type of game where you want to enjoy but you also want to talk about Mississippi State,” Staley said. “We have them on Thursday, and if we don't win that game that nullifies this win. We talked about that to our players. You did what you were supposed to do up until this point. Let's not let up.”

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