



SOUTH CAROLINA 2022-23 NEWS CLIPS

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USC coach Dawn Staley on hope, hoops, national titles and her dog Champ

Scott Fowler, *Charlotte Observer*
October 12, 2022

COLUMBIA — Dawn Staley, the star of this week's episode of "Sports Legends of the Carolinas," has had one of the most sensational careers in women's basketball history.

Currently the head women's basketball coach at South Carolina, where she has directed the team since 2008, Staley's Gamecock squads won national titles in both 2017 and 2022 and has led the nation in women's basketball attendance for eight years in a row. Under Staley, USC has also made the Final Four in four of the past seven NCAA tournaments.

Before her standout coaching career, Staley, 52, was one of the best point guards to ever play the women's game. At Virginia, the Philadelphia native led the Cavaliers to three Final Four appearances, made All-American three times and was the ACC Player of the Year in both 1991 and 1992. She was a three-time WNBA All-Star while playing for the Charlotte Sting from 1999-2005 and won three Olympic gold medals as a player.

Staley was the first former Naismith Player of the Year to earn the Naismith Coach of the Year award. Her South Carolina women's team will be favored to repeat as national champions during the 2022-23 season.

This interview, conducted at Staley's office in Columbia, S.C., has been edited for clarity and brevity and was closely supervised by Champ, Staley's 5-year-old Havanese pooch.

Scott Fowler: I covered the WNBA when the Charlotte Sting was here, and you were one of that team's stars. I particularly remember the 2001 season where the Sting advanced all the way to the championship game. But there were some rough moments certainly for that franchise (which folded after the 2006 season). What do you remember most about your years with the Sting?

Dawn Staley: I only remember great times. The friendships, the locker room talk, the dinners, the traveling and just really enjoying the people that I was on the team with. We oftentimes reminisce.... It's not a lot about basketball, but when we do talk about basketball, we do talk about starting 1-10 (in 2001), and then going all the way to the WNBA championship series.

SF: A lot of people at this point may have forgotten how great of a player you were. Do you believe that you are a better basketball player or basketball coach?

DS: I'm probably a better coach. Because I would say I've always been a coach even when I was playing. Just my (point guard) position demands for me to do coaching-type things. And I think I utilized my playing days to be a better coach.... When I was a player, I only got a chance to impact and be impacted by a small group of people on a team. As a coach now I get to impact my current players, my former players, the entire women's basketball community. So I think my impact is a little bit bigger. And my gratitude is a lot larger because I get to connect with so many different people.

SF: You've tried very intentionally to elevate women's basketball as a sport. And one of the most public examples was what you did with the 2017 national championship net. Tell me about that.

DS: Two years before we won our national championship in 2017, Carolyn Peck, who was the first Black female coach to win a national championship in 1999 (at Purdue), was an analyst doing some of our games. And she pulled me to the side once at shootaround, and told me the story about how one of her teammates gave her a piece of her national championship net.... And she thought that paying it forward in this way, and giving me a piece of her 1999 national championship net, would be the perfect way to show how it impacted her and how she was able to give back.

And she said, "Once you win your national championship, I just want you to return it to me, and then pay it forward to someone else. Another coach."

But we could never come to a good conclusion on who we would bestow it on (after South Carolina's 2017 national title).... And then I just thought about sharing it with other Black coaches on the Division I level, because I know their struggle, and I know what that little piece of nylon, what hope it brought to them.

I knew that not every one of them would win the national championship. But their national championship is maybe being a part of a first-generation graduate on their team. Maybe they needed some hope in everyday life. So I thought it was a great connection piece for Black coaches.

SF: And so you sent pieces of the net to dozens of Division I Black female head women's basketball coaches?

DS: About 70. And I may have missed one or two, and they were quick to remind me of that. I need to keep cutting.

SF: So what are you going to do with the 2022 net — have you decided yet?

DS: I have. I'm going to give it to Black journalists, because their journey is similar. There are not a lot of Black journalists in this space, and I want to lend some hope. Because if they love up on this space like I love up on basketball, the sky's the limit. Sometimes you just need a little push every now and then to keep going, even when the odds are stacked against you.

SF: While you were still playing in the WNBA in Charlotte, you became the women's basketball head coach at Temple. That's remarkable, and I don't understand how you did it. You were Temple's head coach (from 2000-08) and a full-time WNBA player.

DS: I wanted to do it, and I think when people want to do something they prioritize. I'm not one that really has a huge social life.... It's easy once you have people around you that really understand what you're trying to do. And Temple wanted to take that chance on me.... Obviously, they saw something in me that I probably didn't see in myself. ... So we just hired some great people that understood, and were able to take care of, things when I was away for four or five months of the year. And instead of me having to go out on the road to recruit, we'd always say, "Come see our coach playing in the WNBA," because that's ultimately what they wanted to do.

SF: How has your style as a coach changed from your time at Temple to the way you currently coach at South Carolina, more than 20 years later?

DS: Oh, my former players from Temple, they call me "Charmin." They think I'm soft now.

SF: Are you?



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DS: Well, I had a lot of energy when I was 30 years old. But in any profession, you're going to evolve. The core principle of who I am as a coach is still the same. It's just how I deal with people is a little bit different. You know, I was probably less censored in my younger years. Now I'm more censored.... And I also have to be conscious of parents. ... My parents didn't mind me failing, because they knew there are so many life lessons packed into that.

Parents nowadays? They don't want their children to fail.... But I often tell my players that I love them enough to allow them to fail. And I tell them don't measure me by how your parents love you. Because I have a different type of love. I've got a tough love. I have a way of showing you love that will hopefully create longevity, in basketball and in life. Because it's not going to be perfect.

SF: You have to be comfortable being uncomfortable, right?

DS: Yes, you've got to embrace it. I don't like everything about my job.

SF: Like what?

DS: I don't like recruiting because.... I can't fluff it up.

SF: You're honest. You've always been that way.

DS: Yeah, I'll give you the worst-case scenario, and a lot of times people don't want to hear that. They want to hear the fluff.... It's hard to say that without bursting someone's dream, but I've gotta give it to 'em, because it could very well be what happens.

SF: Speaking of recruiting, I wrote a column a couple of months ago when the Charlotte Hornets were looking for a new head coach.

DS: I read that.

SF: My theory was that Dawn Staley would be the perfect next coach for the Charlotte Hornets. I know you've signed an enormous contract here, and I wasn't trying to lure you away.... But I think you could do a great job. And you don't recruit in the NBA, except for free agents.... Same in the WNBA. Does the professional game interest you?

DS: No, it never has and I don't know why because I'm one that I looks for the next challenge. But to me, that isn't a challenge for me. Even when I was playing in the WNBA, I never wanted to be (former Charlotte Sting head coach) Anne Donovan.... My passion is for young people. But I'm getting older. ... And from an NBA standpoint, it takes a long time to be successful.... I'm not afraid of it at all (though) ... I know basketball. I don't think basketball changes a whole lot.

SF: You're 52 now. How long do you see yourself coaching?

DS: I don't see myself (coaching) at 60.

SF: Really?

DS: Yeah. But I didn't see myself coaching (at all), and this is my 23rd year. I am enjoying it. I don't see myself coaching at 60, but if I get some more (recruiting) classes like we've had, then the job is a little easier... I don't have to deal with knuckleheads.... The teams that I've had over the past couple of years, they just want to win. They just want to be great. That is probably the perfect scenario for me... So if our assistant coaches can get some more No. 1 recruiting classes, I might stick around (laughs).

SF: Your dog Champ came into your life after the national championship in 2017. What would he think about getting another dog in the Staley household to celebrate the 2022 national title team?

DS: Champ says: "Hard no. It's a hard no." I do think another dog would help him and shape him a little bit better — he suffers from the only-child syndrome. But I don't think he's willing to give up his space in the household or on the bed at night.

SF: Did you grow up with dogs?

DS: No, I don't even like dogs. I just like Champ.

SF: Does he understand that he's a dog?

DS: No, not at all.... He goes to a lot of places and honestly people don't see me anymore. They just gravitate toward Champ.... I don't know what my life was like before him. Seriously.

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South Carolina head coach Dawn Staley wants unity and versatility as Gamecocks look to repeat

Isabel Gonzalez, CBSsports.com
November 8, 2022

For Dawn Staley, having a sense of unity is the recipe for success on the basketball court and in life. The South Carolina head coach fires up her grill every week to practice what she constantly preaches to her team.

"I got a couple of friends who live in our neighborhood. Coach [Lisa] Boyer -- our associate head coach -- and the softball coach Beverly Smith. We cook Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday," Staley told CBS Sports. "We spend an hour, hour and a half together. It helps you decompress, energize and get ready for the next day. It's cool knowing you have friends and that you enjoy each other's company."

Everybody brings something different to the table. Staley is a pescetarian and grilled salmon is her go-to dish. Boyer is a big fan of salads and usually brings a healthy option. Smith cooks a variety of meals, but Staley is particularly impressed by a delicious baked vegetables recipe that Smith refuses to disclose.

Her players cook together too, but in a different way. The Gamecocks finished last season with a 35-2 overall record, went wire-to-wire ranking No. 1 in the country, and earned the 2022 NCAA championship. They are now entering the season as the No. 1 team in the AP preseason poll for the third consecutive year. There are many ingredients for their success, but Staley says the main one is chemistry.

"I just think that what makes us pretty special is the close genuine bond that our team has. They're so inclusive of each other," Staley said. "I think that's the main thing that we should talk about because it's what's missing in sports. It's that genuine, organic love for one another."

The coach said she rarely has to deal with off the court issues between her players, and she credits two specific leaders for keeping things running smoothly.

"Victoria Saxton and Aliyah Boston, they've seen it all in their three years here and they don't want anything to interfere with our success," Staley said.

Both have different roles in the roster and unique leadership styles that focus on quality relationships with their teammates.

What most people see from Boston is her leadership on the court. The 6-foot-5 forward led her team in points, rebounds, blocks and steals last season. She averaged a double-double with 16.8 points and 12.5 rebounds per game while registering 30 double-doubles on the season. Boston has been the Lisa Leslie Center of the Year for the three consecutive years, and was last season's Naismith Player of the Year and Defensive Player of the Year.

She's an intimidating opponent to face, but off the court Boston is known for her gentle personality.

"She's very kind. She's respectful to how other people feel. There is a way that she governs our team and it's somewhat individual, like she'll talk to different individuals," Staley described. "Because of her relationship with everyone, when she speaks to the entire team it's an immediate respect. It's a mutual respect. It's a leadership style that's non-threatening and everybody can get on board."

Saxton is also a solid player. The 6-foot-2 forward was second on the team in blocks and rebounds, but her most important attribute is how she makes everybody else better. Staley calls her the "glue" of the team, and said that she recognized her gift when she was recruiting her six years ago.

"I told her mother she was going to be a captain. I just saw her energy, saw how she cared for her family members," Staley said. "I don't know how she continues to balance all of it because she is very family oriented, she talks to her mother probably 100 times a day and she's got time for us... She just has the magic touch when it comes to making everybody feel good."

Saxton recently got moved to the three position, a decision that Staley made in order to prepare her for the next level of her basketball career. The coach wants her to work on her 15-foot shot and her 3-point shot. Last season, Saxton only attempted one shot from beyond the arc in 37 games.

"She is very smart, her outside shot is pretty consistent," Staley said. "She hasn't done it in her career at South Carolina but that's a must. That's something that we've been working with her over the past two years. Now we have her on the perimeter, she has to take those shots if she's doing that."

Saxton is not the only player who is being asked to expand her repertoire. The point guard position is one of the main things the team is still figuring out now that Destanni Henderson has moved on to the WNBA. Last season when Henderson missed three games because of a leg injury, power forward Laeticia Amihere ran the point. Staley said Amihere is versatile enough to play any position, and this year she will spend more time on the perimeter.

Zia Cooke spent a significant amount of time at the point during preseason. She has mostly played shooting guard for the Gamecocks but was a point guard in high school.

"She won't be asked to do it full time but it's been great seeing her initiate our offense and getting an understanding of how the position works at this level," Staley said. "It's an opportunity for us to show her versatility for the next level."

Redshirt freshman Raven Johnson could be another option for the point. The 2021 Naismith Girls High School Basketball POY suffered a season-ending left knee injury early last season on Nov. 12. Then there is Kierra Fletcher, a grad transfer from Georgia Tech who started four years for the Buzz but missed last season because of a foot injury.

Staley said both players are not at full strength yet, so the key focus right now is getting them healthy.

"Our point guard position is the position we are trying to get healthy," Staley said. "Like completely healthy -- 100% healthy where we don't have any minute restrictions, where we can get them on the court and they can run our basketball team."

Figuring out a plan for the offense is a must for the Gamecocks. While they were a defensive powerhouse last season, their offense left a lot to be desired. South Carolina had 11 games with 65 points or less, including three under 60 points. One of those was an ugly 49-33 victory against Miami in the second round of the NCAA Tournament.

Staley said she doesn't think that, for the most part, her team was taking bad shots. However, she said it's important to create rhythm. Some of the main changes for this upcoming season will help with that.



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“We are trying to play a little bit quicker than we’ve played. We are pushing, we are passing,” Staley said. “We are just trying to alleviate some of the stress that comes with halfcourt basketball and having two point guards who really haven’t been in our program a long time.”

The versatility of the players in the roster will also be key in filling in the gaps. South Carolina has more bigs than guards, so Staley tries to use their skill sets in different ways.

“When we talk about positionless basketball, this is kinda what we envision,” she said. “We are forced to do it to a certain degree, but we got the people that have the skill set to do it, so we’re pretty good.”

The Gamecocks are looking to become the first program to win back-to-back titles since UConn in 2015-16. Staley said that the taste of success from last year did not change her team’s mentality. The Gamecocks are used to playing in the spotlight and the coach said she doesn’t think they will “shortchange” themselves by not playing their best against every opponent. Winning another national championship is always at the forefront of their minds.

“We’ll play under that pressure of having to win,” Staley said. “I’ve been very fortunate that we’ve had that type of team the past three seasons. It’s the habit that we’ve created over the past three years that we must just continue.”

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The business of Dawn Staley is booming — to her players' benefit

*Kareem Copeland, The Washington Post
November 10, 2022*

Dawn Staley doesn't mince words, and she has a message for all listening: If you want to be in business with her, you have to be in business with the Gamecocks.

The South Carolina coach is one of the most popular, influential and recognizable figures in women's basketball after winning a second national championship and coaching gold medal-winning Team USA in Tokyo. Her Gamecocks went wire-to-wire as the No. 1 team last season and will travel to face No. 17 Maryland on Friday as the top team, still, and the favorite to repeat.

Staley flat-out stated her goal to The Washington Post: She wants the program to be No. 1 on the floor and No. 1 in the NIL space, which allows players to profit off their names, images and likenesses.

"Honestly, I make a lot of money," Staley said. "I want our players to make a lot of money. I want them to feel like I'm able to make the money that I make off of their backs and [I should] be able to help to create some wealth [for them] — no matter how big or small. I am an active participant in wanting them to benefit in this space."

The program, through Staley, recently reached an agreement with upstart company Rewind, which designs plans to defeat Type 2 diabetes. Co-founder and CEO Peter Thulson jumped at Staley's request to involve every player as an early-stage venture without the resources of an established company.

Group and team-wide deals aren't exactly novel, explained Thilo Kunkel, an associate professor in the School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management at Temple University and director of the Sport Industry Research Center. United Wholesale Mortgage announced deals with the Michigan State women's basketball and volleyball teams for 2022-23 after previously having deals with the Spartans' football and men's basketball teams. SmartyStreets, a location data intelligence company, struck a deal with BYU to include every female athlete. The Maryland women's basketball team has an initiative with Fanatics for players to profit off jerseys and T-shirts with individual names and numbers. The list goes on.

The South Carolina-Rewind partnership, however, provides each player with equity in the company through stock options, in addition to some NIL money.

Corey Staniscia, president of AIM Sports, called those deals that include equity in companies "the future." He believes many companies haven't gotten the return on investment from cash NIL deals that they expected and may be looking for a better way.

"I think a lot of these companies are saying: 'Well, instead of giving \$25,000 cash, I think I'd rather give them a little bit of skin in the game,'" Staniscia said. "'And if you're going to do this and you really believe in this company, if you believe in me, I believe in you. And we can do this together. And if I make money, then you're going to make money.' I think that's where a lot of these businesses are now starting to go."

These types of deals are multifaceted with benefits for all parties. The team-wide aspect, according to Staley, helps with camaraderie because each player benefits. Having Staley actively seeking these arrangements has a positive impact on recruiting. Companies get a motivated ambassador and an association with the university.

"We're talking about Rewind basically getting the association with South Carolina without actually paying the University of South Carolina," Kunkel said. "So it's a nice form of ambush marketing. This is definitely a much stronger integration of the student-athlete in the company, and by default it requires those student-athletes to upskill on their business knowledge."

Having stock options and equity in a company is not the norm for college students, let alone student-athletes. So the deal also incentivizes financial literacy. Former Florida State quarterback McKenzie Milton, who has equity in NIL engagement platform Dreamfield, tweeted that he didn't know the difference between a 1099 and W-2 tax forms until this summer.

"It's almost like a mini MBA that they're acquiring if they do it well," Kunkel said.

Staniscia called it on-the-job training in how to create wealth by getting thrown in the deep end and learning how to make good financial decisions. And every player can decide how best to utilize the opportunity.

"Equity goes a long way," said the Gamecocks' Aliyah Boston, the reigning national player of the year and defensive player of the year. "This brand, it can be worth so much money, and for you to have a part of it all for as long as you want it, it's really great. And I think it kind of helps us mature a little bit as a team."

"For me personally, the goal is to make money. ... Build my brand and make sure I'm surrounding myself with good people that want to see me succeed."

Boston's situation is much different from many of her peers as the best player on the defending national champs and the expected No. 1 pick in the WNBA draft. She recently signed a deal with Orangetheory Fitness and had relationships with Bose and Under Armour, to name a few. She and teammate Zia Cooke, another top WNBA prospect, want to benefit financially but also take a long-term approach.

"I don't try to just do deals for the money," Cooke said. "I really do want to do deals that are going to be long term and are going to be an impact for me and the community. I like to do deals that have a message behind it and not just for the money. I think this is something that is going to keep continuing to grow, and it's going to definitely open doors for other companies to want to do deals that are the same."

That's exactly what Staley envisions. Opening doors of financial wealth and literacy for her players. Opening doors for elite recruits to join a program that aggressively works within the NIL space. Opening doors for all players to participate regardless of national popularity.

Staley has grown into a household name as a Hall of Famer with four Olympic gold medals (three as a player), two NCAA coach of the year awards and status as the first African American basketball coach to win multiple Division I national championships. She carries a lot of clout and is being intentional in how she wields it.

"Any company that is interested in me and pushing a product or helping our community in any kind of way," Staley said, "and there is a monetary figure on the line, I want our players to benefit from it — and all of them."



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Dream Merchant

USC's women's basketball coach Dawn Staley wins championships, builds champions

*Page Ivey, The Carolinian Magazine
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Basketball-wise, Dawn Staley has done it all. As a player, she won MVP trophies and gold medals. As a coach, she has won national titles, coach of the year honors and more gold medals. As a mentor, she has watched Gamecock power forward turned WNBA superstar A'ja Wilson win season MVP and a WNBA championship.

Along the way, the winningest head coach in USC women's basketball history has become one of the most recognizable figures in college sports, throwing out first pitches at baseball games and catching a touchdown pass at the Gamecock football team's spring game. She even drove the honorary pace car at the Labor Day NASCAR race in Darlington, South Carolina.

But Staley also transcends the sport, raising awareness for issues she cares about and money for causes she believes in. At her core, she is an advocate — for her players, first, but also for people whose voices might not be heard.

"If I think it's something that is too hard for someone to bear, I'll bear it for them, I'll speak to it," she says. "And hopefully it will open people's eyes and ears and hearts to see it a little bit differently."

The right direction

Dawn Staley was raised in the projects of North Philadelphia, the youngest of five children, and her hoop dreams started early. After being named USA Today's National High School Player of the Year, she took her talents to the University of Virginia. The first person in her family to go to college, she majored in rhetoric and communication studies while racking up on-court honors: ACC Rookie of the Year, NCAA Tournament Most Outstanding Player, Sports Illustrated Player of the Year and two ACC Player of the Year awards. She snagged the Naismith Trophy twice — in 1991 and 1992 — and was a three-time Kodak All-American.

But when she graduated in 1992 there was no "going pro" in women's basketball, not in the U.S. "I didn't have a WNBA. I only had an NBA," she says. "Even though that was far-fetched, it was enough of a dream, enough of a visual to keep me moving in the right direction."

To keep pace with her dreams, she played professionally overseas and for USA Basketball, winning the 1994 Goodwill Games MVP award, USA Basketball's Female Athlete of the Year and a gold medal at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta.

Then professional women's basketball came to the States. Staley joined the Richmond Rage (later the Philadelphia Rage) of the short-lived American Basketball League and was an all-star in 1997 and 1998. In 1999, seven years after she graduated from UVA, Staley signed with the WNBA's Charlotte Sting.

"Sometimes, if you shoot for the moon and you miss, you're still amongst the stars. And that's not a bad landscape to kick in," Staley says. "I'm just thankful for dreams and goals."

Coaching up

Nowadays "Coach" might as well be Staley's first name — it's a huge part of her identity — but when she was playing, that was never part of the dream. Ask longtime Staley assistant Lisa Boyer, who coached Staley in the ABL.

"I used to tell her she'd be a good coach," says Boyer. "She used to tell me, 'I don't want to be one of you.' She wanted nothing to do with coaching, but she just had a gift. She could see the play two to three moves before it actually happened. Her vision was unmatched. She could deliver the ball. She could score the ball."

In 2000, when Staley finally accepted her destiny — and the head coach job at Temple — she asked Boyer for help. She had her hands full trying to rebuild a college program while still suiting up as a player in the WNBA.

"She didn't need me for the Xs and Os," Boyer says. "She needed somebody that had been a college coach, that could organize the office, get the recruiting going. She just needed all the other stuff."

Convincing her former coach wasn't easy, though. The first time Staley called, Boyer had just signed with the Cleveland Rockers and turned her down flat. "And you know she was mad," says Boyer, whose phone continued to light up. "She called me every day. I didn't even say hello. 'You coming to Temple? You coming to Temple?'"

Finally, in 2002, Boyer agreed: "I said, 'OK, but we've got to try to win a championship.' And she's like, 'What do you think we're doing this for?'"

Feeling the energy

While their Temple teams had success, winning four Atlantic 10 championships and making the NCAA tournament six times, Staley and Boyer wanted a bigger stage. "We got ranked as high as 15 and we loved our time at Temple, but we needed something bigger, we needed a university that had a name," Boyer explains. "And when we got here, we had to build it."

And build it they did. After going 10-18 in the 2008-09 season and finishing 11th in the conference, Staley's Gamecocks improved year after year until they became the powerhouse they are today. Going into the 2022-23 season, her program had claimed two national titles (plus a unanimous No. 1 ranking at the end of the pandemic-shortened 2019-20 season), six SEC regular-season championships, six SEC tournament championships and five 30-win seasons.

That success is reflected in the stands. Home games at Colonial Life Arena are now packed with fans (or "fams," as they are affectionately known) and the Gamecocks have led NCAA attendance for the past eight years. Fams also packed the Pastides Alumni Center this summer to celebrate the Gamecocks' latest title — and to applaud Staley.

Kim Smith, a former USC employee and fan-turned-fam, was among the Alumni Center crowd. She attributes some of Staley's success to her recruiting, the rest to her knowledge of the game.



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"I'm glad she was able to see what she has within this state to work with, recruiting some of the locals and getting that talent into the arena," Smith says. "And then it just kind of started building on itself because fans saw that she knows what she's doing. She knows basketball."

But the Alumni Center event wasn't only about basketball. It was also a chance to plug USC scholarship programs dear to Staley's heart: the Gamecock Guarantee program, which helps first-generation college students; the Richard T. Greener Scholarship Fund for minority students; and the Women's Basketball Leadership Fund, which helps student-athletes develop as leaders.

"I know some people came here to celebrate me, but at the same time, I'm feeding off the energy that's in this building and you supporting young people in their careers and their opportunities to graduate from college," Staley told the crowd. "So I'm grateful. I'm thankful. I appreciate you all coming and showing support for me. But I hope we can shine the light on the young people who are first-generation graduates in their families."

Except Staley's efforts are hard to gloss over, especially for community leaders who know her off the court. While she tried to deflect attention, Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott complimented her mentorship of young women, and state Sen. Nikki Setzler acknowledged her work with InnerSole, a charity Staley co-founded in 2013 that has provided more than 30,000 athletic shoes to homeless and underprivileged kids.

"That's Dawn Staley. That's not about basketball. That's about human beings," said Setzler, who is also Staley's West Columbia neighbor. "That's about people that she cares for in this community and across the state and across this country."

#whatmatters

Players want to play for Staley for a lot of reasons. Among the big ones is her readiness to take a stand. Take the dearth of Black women coaches in a sport dominated by Black women players. Of the 64 head coaches in the 2022 NCAA women's tournament, a dozen were Black women, two were Black men, the rest were white. With the tournament win, Staley became the first Black head coach — in both men's and women's competition — to win multiple NCAA championships.

The accomplishment made headlines this spring, but Staley has been raising the issue for years. In 2018, she even addressed it in an op-ed, "Where Are All the Black Coaches?" which appeared in *The Players' Tribune*.

"I think I create an option for young Black women, and I hope for more representation of all ethnicities in head coaching positions," she wrote. "I do think young Black women have to understand how to navigate through life as a Black woman. A lot of the girls playing basketball now — their paths to success are probably similar to mine."

She has also advocated for equitable funding. At the 2021 NCAA Tournament, when players and coaches pointed out disparities between what the NCAA provided teams in the men's tournament versus the women's, Staley made herself heard again — to the point where she says she was talking more about weight rooms and swag bags than her tournament opponents.

Finally, she took it to Twitter. Her blunt assessment of the NCAA began "I cannot be quiet" and was retweeted 13,000 times, helping elevate the issue to the national stage. To underscore her point, she hashtagged her tweet #WHATMATTERS.

More recently, what matters to Staley is USA Basketball and WNBA star Brittney Griner, who is serving a nine-year sentence in a Russian prison for allegedly smuggling cannabis into that country during the WNBA offseason. The U.S. government has questioned the charges and President Joe Biden has called for Griner's release. For Staley, though, it's personal. She coached Griner on two Olympic teams and knows her family. To keep the issue alive, she has tweeted messages of support every day since Griner was detained in February 2022.

"I know her heart, and I consider her a friend," says Staley, who often sports a 'WE ARE BG' lapel pin. "I know in the pit of my stomach that she's being wrongfully detained in a Russian prison. I just feel for her. So I'm going to scream at the top of my lungs. I reach out to anybody I can to see if we can get her home as soon as possible."

Captured dreams

Staley's Gamecocks began practice for the 2022-23 season in late September. Among the players returning from the 2021-22 championship team is senior point guard Zia Cooke, who offers a short list of personal goals: winning her second national championship, graduating with a degree in mass communications and getting drafted into the WNBA.

"I remember in high school, when I was a freshman, they asked, 'What do you think you'll be doing in 10 years?' I'm on the track that I laid out for myself," Cooke says. "I'm on the same track, if not better. And I'm almost at the finish line."

The Toledo, Ohio, native was rated the top high school point guard in the country in 2019. She could have gone anywhere. She came to South Carolina to play for Staley.

"I fell in love with how real she is, how competitive she is. Just knowing that she was a point guard, I wanted to come play and be coached by the best," she says. "And I've literally gotten everything I wanted out of it."

Staley hears these stories all the time — from student-athletes that remind her of herself. And she doesn't mind talking about her own life, whether pointing to her experiences as a first-generation minority athlete or just helping others get the most out of their own talents, opportunities and education.

"I love sharing my story because I hope it resonates with someone else and they can follow their dreams and become successful in their own way," Staley says. "For me, it's all about our players, just being a dream merchant for our players. It fills my heart to know that I'm a part of their journey. I'm hopefully helping them capture their lifelong dreams. Like, I mean — there isn't really anything left for me besides that."



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Winning 101: Dawn Staley, USC maintain success against other elite WBB programs

Jeremiah Holloway, The State
November 21, 2022

No. 1 South Carolina's heavyweight matchup against No. 2 Stanford was a nationally televised game played in front of a sold-out crowd in Maples Pavilion.

Fans tuned in on an NFL Sunday to watch the best two teams in women's college basketball go at it, and the game lived up to the hype with a 76-71 South Carolina overtime victory.

When Dawn Staley arrived as coach at USC in 2008, the program was in no position to play in a game like Sunday's. Any time it did face a storied program such as Stanford, UConn or Tennessee, it struggled to keep up — sometimes getting ran off the court.

But the win against Stanford gave Staley her 101st win against an Associated Press Top 25 opponent and the 16th consecutive victory of that variety. Nowadays, Staley makes it a point to play against some of the elite teams in the country.

"You're measuring yourself," Staley told reporters on Saturday. "If in the NCAA tournament you have to play up against a team like Stanford, you have some familiarity. Whether you win or lose, you have some familiarity, and it just helps preparation later on down the line."

Coaching against multi-time national champions like Tara VanDerveer and Geno Auriemma served as learning experiences for Staley. She recalled some losses against top teams early in her career, and said she sought to build off of them.

"You could take the Stanford losses, you could take the UConn losses, you could take the Tennessee losses," Staley said. "When you lose to traditionally rich programs like those programs that pretty much ran women's basketball, you try to emulate that. You try to take a little bit of what you see that they're great at, and you try to create that with your own program."

South Carolina brought back 10 players from last year's national championship run, one of two that Staley's won at USC.

Some of the team's most experienced members played in big games before becoming champions. Six of the Gamecocks have been with the program since 2019. That group of players lost a postseason to the COVID-19 pandemic, but went 32-1 overall in 2020. It also reached the Final Four prior to last season's title-winning season.

"I love when coach makes the schedule hard for us because, down the road, it helps us in the long run," senior guard Zia Cooke said.

Rather than starting 2021-22 with a mid-major opponent, Staley's Gamecocks opened up against then-No. 5 N.C. State. The squad also played such teams as Oregon, UConn and Duke before beginning conference play.

This year, the team scheduled a closed-door scrimmage against North Carolina before the start of the regular season. USC will also play UConn on the road in the midst of SEC play.

"It gives us a chance to see where we're at against top teams," Cooke said

The victory against Stanford came through a 12-point comeback from the Gamecocks. As USC inched closer, the Cardinal found ways to maintain the lead — for most of the game. After the early moments of the first quarter, USC didn't regain a lead until overtime.

Senior forward and reigning Final Four Most Outstanding Player Aliyah Boston forced the extra time on a jumpshot with 2.1 seconds left in regulation.

The stars of the game like Boston, Cooke, Haley Jones and Cameron Brink ended as the game's leading scorers.

"This is what women's basketball is about, has been about," Staley said after the game. "I think now is the time that the product that we're putting on the floor should be seen by as many eyes as possible."

So while Sunday's game was big for the sport, it wasn't unheard of for Staley.

"We've been doing it for a long time," Staley said. "This is par for the course. I think television now is starting to pick up on it to broadcast it, because we've been doing this for quite some time."

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2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Gamecocks' Kamilla Cardoso chooses dominance after Dawn Staley sermon

*David Cloninger, Charleston Post & Courier
December 8, 2022*

COLUMBIA — They left her alone last year, because they could afford to.

Kamilla Cardoso was in a new place, after being in a new place, added to a dominant team after being a dominant player. From Montes Claros, Brazil, and in the U.S. since age 15, she spent four years in Chattanooga, Tenn., playing high school ball before becoming ACC freshman of the year and co-defensive player of the year in her first season at Syracuse.

But following a team mass defection from the Orange, Cardoso was in Columbia, adding a 6-foot-7 bench piece to a South Carolina roster gunning for a national championship. The Gamecocks welcomed their new center, but everyone knew the situation.

Having a talent like Cardoso, her height making her an opponent's nightmare of a game-changer even if she never scored a point, made the Gamecocks better, but they were already pretty great. They had an established system and while Cardoso would help, she would help, and not take over.

"You come to a team that is national championship-caliber, you have to find your way. You got to figure out your niche, and I think she probably just didn't want to rock the boat," coach Dawn Staley said. "I think Kamilla had some other personal issues that she was dealing with, just being so far away from home and her family, so we just kind of allowed her to find her way."

She played well when she did play, recording 5.4 points, 5.1 rebounds and 46 blocked shots in 32 games. It was far off her Syracuse numbers (13.6, 8.0, 65 blocks) but she didn't need to be the force she was with the Orange, with the offense running through her and as a top defensive threat.

As a Gamecock, Cardoso mostly became known for the megawatt smile she flashed multiple times on the court, even in the heat of battle. She also became known as a vital part of a team that completed its season-long mission of winning the national championship.

In Year 2, with bigs Aliyah Boston, Victaria Saxton, Laeticia Amihere and Sania Feagin returning, it figured to be a repeat for Cardoso.

That wasn't going to be good enough.

Just as she did with Boston early in the season last year, telling her star that she was playing well but the team wouldn't go anywhere if she didn't play her best every night, Staley sat Cardoso down. With all the delicacy of a sledgehammer to a concrete wall, Staley bluntly told her that she needed to be better.

"She was home all summer, came back with a different mindset, but you can get into that same-old, Groundhog Day-type of thing. I'm not going to allow her to be in that space," Staley said. "Because she has goals. And at the rate that she was going, she wasn't going to check those goals off."

Cardoso could have pouted, transferred, quit. Instead she dominated the fourth quarter against then-No. 15 UCLA when the Gamecocks were having trouble matching the Bruins' speed and inside presence, then hammered Memphis in the next game.

That earned Cardoso her first SEC player of the week prize, and opened a previously undetected door for the No. 1 Gamecocks. Opponents naturally try and zone off Boston, making USC's guards beat them from the outside.

If Cardoso can keep up her recent production, foes now have to make a choice: 6-7 intimidator on one block, 6-5 national player of the year on the other. Pick your poison.

Cardoso scored 10 of her 16 points against UCLA in the fourth quarter, with three of her five blocks as the Gamecocks rallied thanks to a 9-2 run. She also never gave up on a breakaway from fabulous freshman Kiki Rice, denying her two easy points by chasing and swatting her layup from behind.

The Memphis Tigers didn't know what to think, as Cardoso played less than five minutes of the first quarter and scored 12 points. Those were part of a 17-2 run that iced the game.

"If we can get those two to play together and play like they did tonight, it gives us another layer of people having to scout us in a different way. This is the kind of performance that we want to see from Kamilla on a consistent basis, and I think we will," Staley said.

"I think we are turning up the heat on her a little bit, and making her do some things that if you don't tell her to do, she's not going to do. We're going to make her a better practice player, we're going to make her just more focused on basketball and being as dominant as she was tonight."

The Gamecocks took off for exams this week but are back at it Sunday against Liberty, part of a women's-men's hoops doubleheader (Lamont Paris' team hosts Presbyterian after the women's game). It will be interesting to see if Staley's sermon to Cardoso still resonates.

USC is already plenty of bad news on every opponent's schedule. If Cardoso stays locked in to her recent performances, there isn't enough good news on the planet to overcome the other team's dread.

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2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Dawn Staley talks USC's seniors, NIL impact, Brittney Griner's release and more

*Jeremiah Holloway, The State
December 11, 2022*

COLUMBIA — Dawn Staley is in her 23rd season as a women's basketball head coach — her 15th with the University of South Carolina.

She's coached the Gamecocks to two national championships with rosters that have produced eight WNBA players — so far. After this season, the team will likely lose key seniors to the professional level, while others will depart with their college eligibility expiring.

Over the years, she's held a prominent voice on social justice topics and in the women's basketball space as an advocate for the sport. Most recently, Staley's been a vocal supporter of WNBA star Brittney Griner, who was detained in Russian prison since February on drug charges. Griner was released on Thursday in a prisoner swap.

The State's Jeremiah Holloway sat down with Staley this past week to discuss the state of USC's program, how she'll address the departure of her most experienced players, her advocacy for Griner and more.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

The State: You set the team's theme for this year, "DNA: dreams, nets and assets." What's the process of getting the theme together? Is it a collaborative process? Who ultimately has the final say with that?

Dawn Staley: Yeah, it is collaborative. It starts far out, and then it really starts heating up when we get closer to us having to reveal what it is. It took us a while to get to that place. But it's collaborative. It's Diana (Koval, communications director), it's Ari (Moore, director of operations). We bring in our creative content people. And it's not like we sit down and meet about it. It's just like, we all sometimes just are gathered in the same place and we're just discussing it. And when it's said, it's like ****taps table**** that's it.

TS: It just sticks?

Staley: It does. Sometimes, you're so close to the situation that when someone else comes in and they say something about it, you actually know. I still like mine. I probably like mine more than DNA. But it was too close to another company.

TS: What was yours gonna be?

Staley: "23 and We." So it's too close to 23 and Me. But it was all DNA-related.

TS: That motto does touch a little bit on the NIL (name, image and likeness) trend. You've spoken in a different interview about how, with NIL, it feels like a pro team in some ways. So with that, and also the way the players handle themselves — obviously they've won a championship before — would you say they carry a pro mindset along with them?

Staley: Yeah, I mean, they're almost forced to, because pros are more than just basketball players. They're thinking about their brand. They're thinking about how they can complement the salaries that they have. And then they have to do things. They have to do things in their free time that, before NIL, they didn't have to do. They have to schedule when and where they utilize their days off, doing deliverables for their NIL deals.

TS: One thing you talked about on media day, as a focus measure, you said you and your staff were practicing intermittent fasting at one point. Is that something you all are still doing?

Staley: I am, until I have to travel. When I travel, it throws me off.

TS: What's that process like?

Staley: I just try to force myself to do things that I ask our players to do. Sacrifice some things. You get used to it. My hours to eat are 12 p.m. to 8 p.m. It's eight hours on, 16 hours off.

So it's good. It's good to kind of force yourself to do some things that are different than your normal routine. Because sometimes, as athletes and coaches, we are creatures of habit. We like things a certain way. And sometimes, this allows you to pivot a little bit just in case you have to pivot. The world doesn't revolve around your habits. Things come up and force you to do some other stuff.

TS: With this team two championships in, it's become a staple in the city of Columbia. There have been a few names to come out of Columbia from a basketball standpoint. From your perspective, how important is basketball to the Columbia area?

Staley: I think is huge. I think our program has capitalized on us having local prospects that are attractive to the nation, like, all across the nation. We've been able to just keep them here, keep them home. And I think we're able to do that because, one, we're able to probably see them more than any other school. Two, we get to know who their parents are, who their friends are. We're in their community, so we're a part of their community

They know us. Growing up, they know who we are. And I do think we present a program that oozes national attention and national championships. And we fit the profile of what a great program is from an attendance standpoint, from a marketing standpoint, from a likability standpoint and from a relationship standpoint. There aren't too many programs that can offer what we can offer. And to do it close to home, it's magnetic.

TS: As the program's reached national prominence, I know you are someone that's big on growing the game. Is that something that you ask of your players as well?

Staley: I don't. I want them to draw their own perspectives of what they want from the game. I want to be an example of one way to do it. But I don't push my agendas on them, at all. I want that to organically happen for them because it organically happened for me. And in their own right, they're watching, they're listening. They're not always advocating, but I know they know. They're knowledgeable about what's happening in our sport.

TS: Since they are on that platform, how do you help them kind of maintain a focus as far as on the court? How do you think their approach is to that?



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Staley: The core group of this team came in here with a business-like mentality. It just happened that way, where you didn't really have to lead them. You didn't really have to talk much about what our culture is, our chemistry. They formed it once they got here. Everybody else that came in really just gravitated towards the examples that they set. Now next year, it'll be a little different. But for this year, with the amount of seniors and grad transfers and grad students that are leaving our program, you take on a different culture, so to speak. We're hoping our culture still stays the same as far as playing for each other, just being very business-like. We hope that still stays in place, but we'll be a lot younger than we've ever been. The core group of our team will be more young than old. So we know that next year will bring different challenges, but we're not fretting the challenges.

TS: With a lot of key players on the team potentially leaving, how early does the process start of preparing for their departures? From a culture standpoint, keeping that going, how do you prepare for losing players of their caliber?

Staley: Emotionally, I'm not really prepping. I just really appreciate. I am savoring all that they've been to our team. Everything. They're low, low maintenance, like low. So I'm just going to savor it. But I know it's going to be a lot different, so I'm already thinking about it. There's nothing you could do. Because each team takes on different characteristics. But this team has been one that it's gone by how our most experienced players have created it. The 2019 class, they came in a lot more mature than most 18-year-olds, in Aliyah (Boston)'s case, 17-year-old. So the more mature they are, the better we can function day to day. But if they don't come in that way, like next year, it's probably going to be a hit in the maturity department. So we'll have to probably babysit a little bit more. We don't mind that, because we are protectors of our peace.

TS: You've talked about it a lot for the last several months, but Brittney Griner being released through the prison swap. What does that mean to you that someone you've known for such a long time is free?

Staley: It means that the people who advocated for BG can be better advocates, for whatever they believe in. A lot of times what you advocate for, you don't always get, and it dies. And you move on. The basketball community didn't move on because we didn't feel like the process was done right. Our U.S. government believed the same things, and they never stopped fighting for her. And it also is proof that there is a God. To be able to be released from the throttle of the Russian government, the percentage of you being released from being in that captivity is slim to none. Slim to none. I know we've had another prisoner exchange over the past couple of months. But they just don't happen very often. So just as the perfect storm happened 294 days ago, there was the perfect result that happened for Brittney. It took months for that to happen, but I do believe that God said on this day, "She will be released." He takes you through things and if you just keep the faith, he'll see you through. Doesn't mean you're not gonna have another test, because Brittney's gonna have another test, another life test that, hopefully, she'll draw on that will push her through.

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Gamecocks' 'The Freshies' wanting to add more championships to USC coffers

David Cloninger, *Charleston Post & Courier*
December 17, 2022

COLUMBIA — It was brought up on a group chat, back in those weird days of self-isolation, when the only sure way of staying safe in a COVID-infected world was to remain inside and text pals.

The No. 1 recruiting class of the 2019-20 women's college basketball season, which had just been denied a chance to win the national championship when the 2020 NCAA Tournament was cancelled, was on the chat it created when all agreed to play at South Carolina.

"Going into our sophomore year, I forget who said it, but it was, 'Do we need to change (the chat's name)?,'" recalled Olivia Thompson. "But it never went further."

The name has stayed the same, through the return to the court in 2020-21, when USC finished an inch away from playing for the title, and 2021-22, when the Gamecocks stormed through the season and returned from Minneapolis with their second championship. They're seniors now, those five children who reported to Dawn Staley three years ago, but even more committed now than they were then.

Their legacy isn't complete. Three starters and two contributors on what is again the No. 1 team in America will decide when their run is done. It will only be over when they say so.

And if changing the nickname for their five-woman group chat via text message comes up again, maybe they'll consider doing it.

But don't count on it.

"It would hurt, trying to re-name that," said Brea Beal. "We're The Freshies."

Foreword

Thompson was the first to pledge, the local from Lexington who accepted a walk-on offer in August 2018. The all-time leading scorer in Lexington High's history, Thompson was deadly from the 3-point line and was hoping to earn a USC scholarship down the line (which she did in August 2020).

The signing period finished the class. Zia Cooke picked the Gamecocks on Nov. 5, Beal on Nov. 8, Laeticia Amihere on Nov. 15 and Aliyah Boston on Nov. 21. All were ranked among the nation's top 11 prospects and together, they were labeled the best class in the country and one of the best in the sport's history.

The text messages began early.

"That's something that came when we all had signed but before we got here," Cooke said. "We all had each other's numbers, but it got to the point where we all were talking every day."

Just as nobody was sure who set up the group, none of the five are sure who came up with the name. It doesn't take a linguist to figure out the quintet's looming freshman status was the inspiration, but who actually suggested it isn't clear.

Regardless, they were The Freshies.

"That's the name we stuck with, and even when we were sophomores and juniors, we didn't change it," Cooke said. "We hold each other accountable, since Day 1. It's a sisterhood and it's special."

Exposition

Amihere was the first on campus, the Canadian coming to Columbia in January 2019 to rehab a knee injury from high school. The others arrived that summer, adding to a talented but fractured team that finished the 2018-19 season with a lot of questions.

Staley knew what she had, and also knew how dangerous it could be to heap so much on a freshman, much less a group of freshmen.

But she needed her best talent on the floor, and there was a lot of it in that group that already seemed to have a predetermined feel for each other.

Three of them — Cooke, Beal and Boston — started that first game. They haven't stepped out of the lineup since.

Boston draws the headlines, an uncommon mix of power, drive and balance that enabled her to win every national player of the year award there was last year, among several other accolades. But even she's kept in check by her sisters.

"Everyone's able to say what they want, everyone's able to take it in. Everybody is a leader and we all respect each other," Boston said. "LA says something, or Liv says something, we take it and say, 'OK, we hear you.'"

Staley tapped into that. With Boston the focal point of the offense and the centerpiece of the Gamecocks' defense, the coach can't have the player be silent. She's challenged Boston individually, but has also challenged her to suggest a more intense dynamic from all of The Freshies.

"She tells me, 'I don't want you guys to blend,'" Boston said. "She doesn't want any of us to take a back seat to the others. Our focus is not to blend on the court. It's to show out, each and every one of us."

The players have accepted the challenge and encourage, or call out, the others in their group chat. It could be Thompson telling Boston to consider this when shooting a 3-pointer, or Amihere giving Cooke some pointers on bringing up the ball.

Egos were put aside long ago. It's all about the team, something Staley quickly picked up on.



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“This group all along has wanted to win championships,” Staley said. “They never said one championship. They said championships.”

“We were blessed to have a group that came in with the same mentality that wanted to win all the games, that wanted to win a national championship. Having us be surrounded by the same attitude, the same ideas and dreams, that definitely got us to the point we are now,” Beal said. “We’re still a tight group, we still bond together every day.”

Final chapter?

Amihere mentioned the “5” emoji the group uses, while they recently posted a freshman and senior photo which Staley re-tweeted with “The Freshies!” and five hearts. They’re a major part of why the Gamecocks are ranked No. 1 and are favorites to again win the national championship.

It works because nobody is above the group, or the team. When directly asked who the leader of the group was, each stated that there was no one.

It’s all.

“I don’t think it was anybody but God who made sure we were all together. I think it was destiny that brought us together,” Cooke said. “Our relationship off the court is what made us perform so well on the court.”

USC is 10-0 after a Thursday win over South Dakota State and will enter the 16-game crucible of the SEC schedule in less than two weeks. The holidays provide some time for rest, which is vital since the heavy work is about to begin.

With one championship trophy in Colonial Life Arena, The Freshies will never be forgotten. They still don’t feel they’re done.

Another title, since it’s there to be won, would be a good final step. And there remains the possibility that each could return for another season due to the NCAA’s COVID exemption, although all five coming back is unlikely.

Maybe another trophy case, with all of their pictures in it once they’re gone. Maybe a statue of the five. They’ve shared the success and would like to make everything attached to them a group effort.

That’s what makes it work.

“We were able to figure out that equal balance our freshman year. It’s still The Freshies on every single app, social media, whatever,” Boston said. “It will always be The Freshies.”

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Staley, No. 1 South Carolina making a point with new guards

*Pete Iacobelli, Associated Press
December 28, 2022*

COLUMBIA — South Carolina's Dawn Staley believes her point guards this season have all the skills necessary to help the Gamecocks win another national title.

Everything except experience.

"Experience," Staley said, "is irreplaceable."

The Hall of Famer and one of the game's greatest point guards hopes her latest group of floor generals has gained enough experience during non-conference play over the season's first two months to be productive as the top-ranked Gamecocks start defense of their Southeastern Conference regular-season crown against Texas A&M on Thursday night.

And what South Carolina lacks in seasoning, Staley said, it makes up for in numbers.

"A lot of teams don't have the luxury of the depth that we have in people that can play the point for us," Staley said Wednesday.

Georgia Tech graduate transfer Kierra Fletcher was brought in this offseason to add some needed decision making with the loss of Destanni Henderson, the starting point guard for the 2022 national champions.

Second-year player Raven Johnson was one of the country's highest-ranked recruits before last season. She was expected to learn behind Henderson and then go full bore into her sophomore season. But Johnson injured her knee in November 2021 and entered this year still in need of the lessons it takes to run the offense.

Fletcher has started 10 games for 12-0 South Carolina with Johnson starting the other two.

The Gamecocks have also used shooting guard Zia Cooke and 6-foot-3 forward Laeticia Amihere to run the offense at times this season. And Staley has let five-star freshman Talaysia Cooper take control often when the reserves are on court in blowouts.

"I like the progression of where Kierra is right now. I like where Raven's headed since she's still a freshman," Staley said. "I like the fact that we can call on Zia and LA (Amihere) when we need a veteran, someone that's been here and knows how to run some of the plays from the past."

Johnson, the highest-rated member of South Carolina's No. 1 overall recruiting class entering 2021, feels she's gotten healthier and is playing more like her high-school self with her minutes increasing.

Johnson had a career-best seven assists in the Gamecocks' 102-39 victory over Coastal Carolina on Dec. 21, their last game before the holiday break.

"My comfortability is high because I'm way better without the brace in my way," said Johnson, who no longer wears a brace on her rehabbed knee. "I just feel like my normal self."

It has been a successful rotation, but a far cry from Staley's history as a player or coach. During her college career Staley missed only three games — all as a sophomore — out of 133 over four years as the single-minded point guard for Virginia from 1989-92.

From 2017-20, the coach relied on Tyasha Harris to lead her South Carolina offense. Harris, who started all but 12 of 139 games in her four seasons, helped the Gamecocks win three SEC Tournament titles and the 2017 national championship.

After Harris, it was Henderson who started all 65 games she played in her last two seasons as South Carolina reached the Final Four in 2021 then won it all a season ago.

Staley isn't panicking amid the inconsistency at point guard, though she acknowledges it has been a concern.

"I think we're just different," Staley said of her team. "You're talking about (Henderson) who as a two-year starter, in this program four years. She had incredible speed, she had predictability because she knew. Whether she played well or not, she just knew."

Staley expects to soon feel that way about this year's point guards. Fletcher and Johnson are working to improve, progress Staley sees continuing as the team gets into SEC play with an eye on the NCAA Tournament.

Besides, Staley said with a smile, "we got enough to give people a different look."

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How Dawn Staley, No. 1 USC are looking for consistency from sophomore Sania Feagin

Jeremiah Holloway, The State
December 31, 2022

South Carolina sophomore forward Sania Feagin received high praise from head coach Dawn Staley after the team's Dec. 11 win against Liberty.

"She's super talented, like, super," Staley said then. "She's probably the most talented post player that we have. And that's Aliyah (Boston) included."

Feagin displayed some of that talent again in her productive SEC opener on Thursday, recording 11 points and six rebounds while coming up with two big blocks in the No. 1 Gamecocks' 76-34 win over Texas A&M at Colonial Life Arena.

While her role has increased from her freshman year, Feagin's spot in the rotation continues to change by the game.

She was a starter in the exhibition against Benedict and recorded a double-double. She didn't play (coach's decision) against Cal Poly and Charleston Southern. In the six games in which she's played at least 11 minutes, she's scored in double-digits five times.

Now, Staley wants Feagin to put it all together.

"She's gotta play better defense," Staley said after Thursday's game. "The offense is coming along nicely. But, I mean, you can't trade baskets. At some point, she's got to get stops. She's got to be able to defend. That's the only thing that's really holding her back. And she's getting there. She's aware of it."

Staley said that Boston became the National Player of the Year due to her work ethic and high IQ, and thinks that Feagin's abilities can make her great, too.

Feagin has come to Staley at times this season to inquire about ways to stay more consistent.

"The conversations me and coach have been having have been more of me asking, 'What can I do to help better my game?'" Feagin said. "'What can I do in practice and behind closed doors? What can I do to better myself as a player and as a team player?'"

The 6-foot-3 sophomore from Ellenwood, Georgia, was the top-ranked forward coming from Forest Park High School and the No. 4 player overall in ESPN's Class of 2021 rankings. She played 4.3 minutes per game in 31 appearances last year.

But over the summer, Feagin took the time to enhance her skillset and caught the attention of her coaches and teammates.

"She's been in the gym," senior guard Zia Cooke said.

Feagin has scored at least 11 points in four of her last five games. Her season-high point total is the 15 she scored in the season opener against East Tennessee State. She's currently averaging 7.8 points and 3.7 rebounds.

She believes that her game has elevated from her freshman season to now on both ends of the court.

"I feel like I'm more dominant, attacking more," Feagin said. "Defensive-wise, I feel like if you come in the paint, I'm there to block it."

South Carolina's post rotation is a bit cluttered with playmakers. Boston and Victaria Saxton — with a combined 256 games between them — have started in every game. Junior center Kamilla Cardoso is experiencing a breakout season of her own.

Senior forward Laetitia Amihere comes off the bench but serves as the team's fourth-leading scorer, and even freshman forward Ashlyn Watkins has shown flashes of productivity.

Staley said after the Liberty game that Feagin "doesn't like me very much all the time," but that she continues to invest in her because she believes in her potential. Feagin's recent games have shown what she can do on the offensive side, and she's blocked five shots in her last two contests.

"She's gotta connect practices, she gotta connect games," Staley said. "Once she's got it, then it's no further discussion. You know what it takes, but every now and then, she needs reminders. When you don't have to remind her as much, she's good. But I still have to remind her, or she reminds me what she was supposed to do. So she's right where she needs to be."

Feagin's role in the team's SEC season debut could mark the start of her turning a corner, but time will tell. For now, she'll continue to carve out her role among the team's assortment of bigs.

"When she plays, she's earned it," Staley said. "It won't be a gimme."

###



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Strength in numbers: How No. 1 South Carolina women are using 'energizers' this season

Jeremiah Holloway, The State
January 3, 2023

The top-ranked South Carolina women's basketball team features three preseason Wooden Award watch list players — but head coach Dawn Staley isn't afraid to implement the team's other assets.

Of the 82.6 points USC is averaging per game, 42.7 of those are produced by players coming off the bench.

"I want (opponents) to prepare for 13 players," Staley said in early December. "When you have to spend (a lot of) time on 13 players, that's when you're seeing something."

The player total is now 14 after freshman forward Chloe Kitts joined the team two weeks ago.

South Carolina's returning reserves didn't immediately impact games last season with the rigorous non-conference schedule and national championship run, with last year's unit averaging just 21.1 points per game.

Players like Bree Hall and Sania Feagin were freshmen, and Raven Johnson was injured early in the season. Former Gamecock Saniya Rivers didn't see big minutes as a freshman last season either.

But the depth has improved with the development of the returning players, and some additions to the roster.

Junior center Kamilla Cardoso has improved her production, ranking third on the team in points per game (8.9), second in rebounds (8.1) and first in blocks (1.9). Senior forward Laeticia Amihere has excelled off the bench, averaging 7.3 points per game.

"When you have someone like (Amihere) that's playing super well, and Kamilla has turned the page, you've got to prep for them," Staley said.

Amihere has been with the team since 2019, and functions as both a post player and a ball handler. Staley said she likes bringing Amihere into games off the bench because of the push she gives the team.

Amihere has embraced the reserve role, starting in just four of her 103 career games. She said some of the younger players in the backup unit have come along nicely so far.

"We also get different sides of everybody each game," Amihere explained. "Sometimes, somebody might need scoring, somebody might need to be good on defense. We're definitely seeing the all-around game evolving."

Sophomores Hall and Feagin also have contributed to the offensive game plan, increasing their scoring averages by 3.8 points and 5.9 points, respectively.

The team features three true freshmen — Kitts, Ashlyn Watkins and Talaysia Cooper — who have shown flashes of brilliance. Still, there's room for improvement.

"You really just don't know," Staley said of the younger players. "They could have breakout games. They could suck, too. But you don't know, so you have to scout them."

Johnson leads the team with 3.1 assists per game. She played in just two games last season before sustaining a knee injury. Johnson wore a knee brace for the first eight games of the season but is now playing unrestricted.

She and Amihere are the primary ball handlers in the second unit, called upon to bring a different punch from the starters.

"We call each other 'energizers'," Johnson said. "When we come in, we try to bring that energy off the bench, that spark off the bench. Just make the game go to the next level."

In the close games, the team has relied mostly on its experienced players to play the bulk of the minutes. The freshmen and sophomores have played in the majority of the games, though the minutes tend to vary.

Staley said the younger players understand the caliber of roster they joined, and that growth takes time.

"Greatness is a process, it doesn't really happen like that," Staley said as she snapped her fingers. "I think we do a really good job of painting a picture of how we see them, now and in their future. Each day, we just try to pour into them to get better."

With South Carolina's student-led practice squad off for winter break, the team's younger players have gotten all the reps in practice heading into Monday's game against Georgia (7 p.m., SEC Network).

As SEC play continues, the Gamecocks will utilize their depth in efforts to secure another regular-season title.

"We all have that chemistry," Johnson said. "We all tell each other if we're wrong, tell each other if we're right. We also have a friendship, a bond. I think that also ties into the stuff we do on the court."



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Why rotating Kierra Fletcher, Raven Johnson is working for South Carolina women's basketball

Emily Adams, Greenville News
January 5, 2023

COLUMBIA — In South Carolina women's basketball's 94-42 rout of Auburn on Thursday at Colonial Life Arena, point guards Kierra Fletcher and Raven Johnson recorded very different but equally impactful stat lines.

Fletcher, who started and played 20 minutes, recorded a season-high five assists, a steal, her second block of the season and her first 3-pointer of the season. She had her second-highest scoring performance a Gamecock, shooting 3-of-5 for seven points.

Johnson, who played 15 minutes, led the team's season-high 25 assists with seven and led in steals with three. She also logged a block and three defensive rebounds, though she shot just 1-of-3 from the field for two points.

"What we've been working on is trying to convert and make the right pass, and the ball should find who should shoot it. We did a good job tonight," coach Dawn Staley said. "Kierra is just really picking it up. I think she's a lot more comfortable, and I think Raven is a lot more comfortable as well."

Different but equally impactful has been the story of the season for the Gamecocks point guards, who entered the 2022-23 season with the expectations of Destanni Henderson's impact hanging over them. Henderson, who now plays for the Indiana Fever, helped lead South Carolina to the national title last season with a career-high 26 points in the championship game.

Both Fletcher and Johnson came into this season with question marks. Fletcher, a graduate transfer from Georgia Tech, missed all of the 2021-22 season with a foot injury and was still getting back into form at the start of this season. Johnson, a redshirt freshman, suffered a season-ending left knee injury after appearing in just two games and only recently shed the knee brace that she wore for the first several games of 2022-23.

"I definitely think I'm settling in a lot more, and I feel it when I'm playing," Fletcher said after beating Auburn. "My dad actually texted me and said it looks like I'm playing a little bit more settled in as well. I'm just trying to make great plays for my teammates. I love rebounding ... and just also trying to make better passes into the post. That's something me and coach have talked about, so I've been trying to do better at that from the point guard position."

The two point guards have played practically equal minutes this season, with Fletcher averaging 15 minutes per game to Johnson's 14. Fletcher has been a more significant scoring threat, shooting 42.3% from the field and averaging just under five points per game, while Johnson shoots a team-low 24.5% from the field. Fletcher also leads in rebounds, averaging 3.6 to Johnson's 2.4, but the redshirt freshman is a stronger ballhandler averaging 3.3 assists to Fletcher's two.

While the two are competitive with each other — they actively vied for the starting spot through much of the non-conference slate — Fletcher said the pair's differences give them a higher level of mutual respect for each other and their respective roles in the Gamecocks' rotation.

"We go at it in practice all the time, but I lean on her and she leans on me," Fletcher said. "I learn a lot from her. I always tell her, I wish I could pass like she does. She just sees the floor so differently. I'm always looking at the way she's playing as well as she does with me, and I think both of us bring dynamics to the team that gels really well."

The flexibility between point guards also gives the team opportunities to weaponize its depth in different lineups: Johnson and junior center Kamilla Cardoso, for example, work well together in the offense, so Staley tries to work them onto the court at the same time as much as possible.

"They run the team a little bit different: Kierra is a little more methodical and Raven is a little more freewheeling in getting the ball to people where they can be effective," Staley said. "Her and Kamilla do have a really good connection, and hopefully they'll both continue to learn and grow and make us better."

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2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Quadruple-teams? How Aliyah Boston is adjusting to new levels of defensive pressure

Jeremiah Holloway, The State
January 7, 2023

Life as the reigning National Player of the Year comes with much added attention — and South Carolina's Aliyah Boston is receiving more than her share.

Georgia women's basketball coach Katie Abrahamson-Henderson made the plan simple for Monday's 68-51 loss to the No. 1 Gamecocks.

"Clog the paint," she said.

USC's star senior forward scored a total of 10 points in the first two games of SEC play, shooting 2-of-11 from the field. She followed that with 13 points, nine rebounds and four blocks in Thursday's 94-42 win over Auburn.

She's totaled eight double-doubles this season, and opposing teams have made it an emphasis to pack the paint against Boston and the Gamecocks.

The level of zone defenses, trapping and double teams — and even quadruple teams — that Boston's seen is more than she's used to, but she and the Gamecocks (14-0, 3-0 SEC) are finding ways to work around it.

"I think in the moment, it's kind of frustrating for me just because I'm trying to maneuver around it and really figure it out," Boston said. "I had a pretty good practice (Wednesday) trying to maneuver around stuff like that. It's gonna get better."

The single-point scoring games for her against Texas A&M and Georgia marked just the fourth time in her career in which she went consecutive outings without reaching at least 10 points. The last time it occurred was in the first two games of her decorated junior year.

While Boston's overall stats have declined from a year ago, head coach Dawn Staley doesn't feel her talent has dipped at all.

"She's still the best player in the country," Staley said. "I don't care what people post or say. No one's seeing what she's seeing. And until someone is seeing that, then you really can't take her National Player of the Year Award away."

Staley told Boston to consider it "flattering" that it takes everything from an opposing defense to stop her from getting her shots off.

And when the team's needed big performances from her, Boston's shown why she brought home so many national awards a year ago.

In games against ranked opponents — Maryland, Stanford and UCLA — she averages 16 points, 12 rebounds and two blocks, which nearly mirrors her typical stat line from the 2021-22 season. On paper, her shot attempts and minutes per game have fallen by about four apiece this season. With the Gamecocks winning by wide margins at times, other players have been given opportunities to make contributions on the court.

Boston said she's had conversations with Staley about the moments when she's especially needed for USC.

"I think for me, it's just really about making sure I'm staying ready, but also just continuing to be that great teammate, even if things aren't going the way I want it to go," Boston said.

Boston's contributed in other ways for South Carolina this season besides scoring.

She leads the team with 8.9 rebounds per game and is second with an average of 1.6 blocks.

Others have stepped up for the Gamecocks during Boston's quieter nights. Senior guard Zia Cooke dropped in 31 points for USC in Monday's win against Georgia. Freshman guard Talaysia Cooper came off the bench and scored 15 points in the SEC opening victory over Texas A&M.

"I told (Boston) again, because of her, everybody got better," Staley said. "Everybody on our team got better because of the things that she was able to accomplish."

Though she's the best player on the college level, Boston likely won't see the same style of defenses in the WNBA.

With the heightened talent at the next level, it becomes harder for teams to send multiple defenders on one player each play, or even neglect some of the perimeter players to clog the interior. There's also a defensive three seconds rule in the pros, both Boston and Staley pointed out.

"The glory days are ahead of her when she'll see a one-player coverage," Staley said.

Part of adjusting to the added defensive pressure is mental, Boston said. She credited her coaching staff and teammates for helping her keep things in perspective.

"It's just in your mind making sure, 'OK, well I didn't have my double-double, but that's OK,'" Boston said. "'We won the game, on to the next.'"

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2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Why Aliyah Boston's stats are in decline — and Dawn Staley isn't bothered

Emily Adams, Greenville News
January 8, 2023

Breaking records is no longer a big deal for South Carolina women's basketball star Aliyah Boston.

Boston recorded her 600th career rebound in an SEC game against Mississippi State, surpassing the record 599 set by Alaina Coates from 2014-17. Coates took 62 games to set the record, and Boston broke it in 52. After the game, Boston was unfazed, more concerned about the hard-fought 58-51 win for the Gamecocks (16-0, 4-0 SEC).

"That's cool. I didn't even know that was a thing, so that's pretty exciting," Boston said. "But I just have to continue to do what I'm doing ... I'm really just trying to stay poised during it all"

Boston's 12 points and 15 rebounds at Mississippi State (12-5, 1-3) marked her first double-double of SEC play this season. Last season, the senior broke the SEC record for consecutive double-doubles held by former LSU star Sylvia Fowles with 24 in a row. Boston also set the program records for double-doubles consecutively, in a season and in single-season SEC games.

It's partly thanks to those records that Boston was named the consensus national player of the year last season. She averaged 16.8 points and 12.4 rebounds per game, ranking No. 1 in the nation in double-doubles with 30 and No. 4 in rebounding.

This season has not been so dominant on the stat sheet. Boston is averaging 11.5 points and 9.3 rebounds per game and has nine double-doubles through 16 games. She ranks No. 46 in the country in rebounding, No. 30 in blocks and No. 11 in double-doubles. However, despite her statistical decline, there is no doubt Boston still ranks among the top players — if not the best — in women's college basketball.

Boston is simply playing less often this season. She was on the court for nearly 29 minutes per game last season but is down to 24 minutes per game this year, largely because the Gamecocks don't need her as much: They are beating opponents by an average of 38.9 points, the second-highest margin in the country, and are No. 1 in average points allowed per game at 43.5.

South Carolina's ultra-deep roster has given 6-foot-7 Kamilla Cardoso some of the numbers that would have gone to Boston. The junior is averaging 9.4 points, 7.4 rebounds and has two double-doubles. Last season, the team's second-best rebounder was Victaria Saxton at 5.8 per game.

Point guard Kierra Fletcher, a graduate transfer from Georgia Tech, also recently admitted that she jokes with Boston about stealing her rebounds.

"I don't want to continue to put special emphasis on Aliyah's double-doubles. I want her double-doubles to naturally happen," coach Dawn Staley said. "I don't want her to feel like if she doesn't get a double-double that her play is unsuccessful ..."

Defenses are also approaching Boston with a different intensity. She saw a quadruple-team against Georgia, and nearly every opponent has attempted to zone the Gamecocks' bigs out of the paint to varying degrees of success.

"It's definitely a new type of junk defenses we've been seeing, and as each game goes on if we continue to see it, I'm going to be more aware and able to maneuver a lot better," Boston said. "But at the same time ... my teammates have been doing a great job knocking down shots, so it's going to continue to open up."

The competition for player of the year, even in the SEC, will be hotly contested. Tennessee guard Jordan Horston leads the Lady Vols with 24.8 points, 6.8 rebounds, 3.6 assists and 1.5 steals per game. LSU star Angel Reese, a transfer from Maryland, leads the nation in rebounds, averaging 15.8, plus 24.1 points, 4.8 assists and 1.5 steals.

Horston and Reese have flashy numbers, but Boston's impact goes beyond that. Her best scoring game of the season came in a comeback win over No. 12 UCLA. She hit a season-high seven field goals in an overtime showdown with No. 2 Stanford. Her best rebounding performance came in the back-and-forth battle with Mississippi State. She has put up a double-double against every ranked opponent the team as faced.

Boston is still at the top of the national player of the year race, because whenever the No. 1 Gamecocks need a boost, she is the one they turn to.

"A double-double doesn't mean you played great. It really doesn't," Staley said. "For Aliyah, we ask her to do so much more than score and rebound. We ask her to defend, We ask her to be the energy our team needs at times, we ask her to talk in the huddles ... A lot comes with Aliyah and her performances. Outwardly we see the double-doubles, but inwardly we see all of the contribution she brings to our team."

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2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Victoria Saxton serves as USC's 'mother hen' in fifth year with Gamecocks

Jeremiah Harrington, The State
January 10, 2023

Dawn Staley recalled fifth-year senior Victoria Saxton's official recruiting visit with South Carolina not going so well in 2017. For that reason, Saxton's future commitment to the Gamecocks seemed far from a sure thing.

"It didn't feel like we were gonna get her," Staley said.

Saxton did sign with South Carolina in the program's 2018 class. When she arrived on campus, Staley saw leadership qualities in the five-star forward from Rome, Georgia. And 145 games, a global pandemic, two Final Four runs and a national championship later, Saxton's fully embraced that capacity.

Staley considers the veteran "low maintenance" who stays true to her personality.

"She's an old soul," Staley said. "She's like a grandma, a mom, a mother hen."

Saxton doesn't receive the spotlight that her starting post mate Aliyah Boston garners, nor does she get the amount of touches that leading-scorer Zia Cooke does. But she's been a starter for three seasons in a row and brings a high basketball IQ to the court.

She's not one to fill up the stat sheet, but she has accepted her place on the team as someone who does the unnoticed. The 145 games she's played in is the second most in school history, only trailing LeLe Grissett's mark of 150.

"I've always been a leader all my life," Saxton said. "So coming in just knowing that it's a role to take on and continue to keep doing what I do best."

Saxton — like other athletes — was granted an extra year of eligibility when the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 shortened her sophomore year. She opted to take that extra year after the team won the national championship in April.

She joined South Carolina's Class of 2018 from Model High School, rated as the No. 6 forward by ESPN. Saxton earned her degree in criminology before returning to USC for a fifth season.

Her on-court role has mainly consisted of crashing the glass and staying active on defense for the Gamecocks.

"The things that she does are effective no matter how defenses play us," Staley said. "She's an incredible rebounder. She's smart defensively."

Saxton scored a season-high 12 points in USC's win against Auburn on Thursday. She left the game early after sustaining a cut on her nose in the second half.

Those scoring outputs can be rare with Boston's knack for double-double performances, the emergence of junior center Kamilla Cardoso and the development of sophomore forward Sania Feagin.

Staley said she wants to get Saxton more looks on offense, with midrange shots to counteract the often clogged painted area.

"I wanted to get her right back out there (on Thursday) because she was playing so great and I think she needs to have more confident moments," Staley said. "Probably by her own standards, she's gotten off to a slower start than normal."

Saxton said she's beginning to get back to her usual self, and said she had to set aside "personal things" to regain focus on the court.

As the team's elder stateswoman, Saxton is able to aid the inner workings of the team to help the younger players grasp concepts. South Carolina currently rosters four freshmen and two sophomores.

Saxton is comfortable with leading vocally and by example, allowing others to follow her lead.

"All the little things matter," Saxton said. "So any little thing that I see, I try to make sure I can just give them any sort of advice. Watching film, just anything."

Saxton's "magnetic" energy sets an example for South Carolina's youth and its seasoned athletes as well.

As the Gamecocks seek to repeat as national champions, they'll look toward Saxton's direction during their pursuit.

"She comes in, she plays hard every day," Staley said. "She's no worry. So we appreciate that, and we let her know that. And that's a premium to have on a team now."

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2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Why South Carolina women's basketball, Dawn Staley leaned on Ashlyn Watkins in Missouri win

Emily Adams, Greenville News
January 15, 2023

COLUMBIA — In South Carolina women's basketball's 81-50 rout of Missouri on Sunday, Ashlyn Watkins didn't record a career high in any statistical category. That didn't stop coach Dawn Staley from labeling the freshman's performance as her best of the season.

Watkins played 26 minutes against Missouri, nearly double the 14 minutes she played in the previous three games combined for the Gamecocks (17-0, 6-0 SEC). She shot 4-for-5 from the field and 5-for-6 from the free throw line for 13 points while also adding six rebounds.

"She was locked in. She was locked in for two days in our preparation," Staley said. "I thought Ashlyn played extremely well, really locked in and had probably her best game as a Gamecock."

The clearest sign of Staley's increased confidence in the freshman came less than five minutes into the first quarter. Watkins was the first player off the bench, subbing in for Victoria Saxton after Missouri (14-5, 3-3) tied the game 11-11. It was the first time Staley brought Watkins on ahead of the usual rotation led by junior center Kamilla Cardoso and senior forward Laeticia Amihere.

Staley said her decision to lean on Watkins started during practice this week, and she saw the freshman as the best matchup against Missouri senior Haley Frank. Frank, the Tigers' leading scorer, was held to just nine points on three 3-pointers.

"I thought that against Haley Frank, her athleticism and ability to maneuver around screens was something we could benefit from to give (Frank) a different look," Staley said. "We helped a little bit off Frank too much (in the first quarter), and they make you pay, so it was us locking in the plan the way we needed to play and having early communication."

Watkins, a Columbia native, was a highly-anticipated addition to South Carolina's lineup this season. The Cardinal Newman alumna was the No. 12 prospect in the country for the 2022 class and earned McDonald's All-American honors last season.

In her first year with the Gamecocks, Watkins has appeared in 16 games, averaging 6.2 points and 3.8 rebounds. She also put down the program's first dunk in a win over Clemson, becoming just the ninth player in women's college basketball history to do so.

"I feel like I have proven myself to play more," Watkins said. "I know we have a lot of great people on our team and I'm not going to get as many minutes as I want as a freshman, but I know that I have to work hard for those minutes."

Staley has had high expectations for the freshman from the beginning. She started working with Watkins one-on-one to build her into a more aggressive player and improve her body awareness long before SEC play began.

"As long as she's played, she had to just jump over people to score, but she's got talent," Staley said after Watkins scored a career-high 16 points against Coastal Carolina on Dec. 21. "I've worked with her every day after every practice just getting her ready ... just to get her more comfortable. She's powerful, so it's just working on some of the mechanics of putting her in a good position to score or do something with the basketball other than jump."

###



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

USC's inquisitive guard Talaysia Cooper taking advantage of freshman minutes

Jeremiah Holloway, The State
January 16, 2023

South Carolina freshman guard Talaysia Cooper is doing what she can to aid USC's reigning champion women's basketball team.

Part of Cooper's development, head coach Dawn Staley said, involves her learning new aspects of the game. And she's doing so in the most fundamental way possible: by asking questions.

"When you're asking questions, you are evolving, you're progressing," Staley said last month. "And they're good questions. They're not just brown-nosing questions, they're really good questions about details."

Cooper has spent time at both point guard and shooting guard this season for the Gamecocks. She has scored 10 or more points twice — including a season-high 15 points against Texas A&M in the team's SEC opener. She's averaging 4.8 points per game in 14 games off the bench.

"It makes me think, but I know it's just helping me get to where I need to be," Cooper said about playing both guard spots.

Cooper joined the Gamecocks from East Clarendon Middle-High School in Turbeville, South Carolina as a five-star recruit and McDonald's All-American. Cooper is no stranger to scoring the basketball, scoring more than 3,000 points at East Clarendon.

She has also shown activity on the defensive side of the ball while wearing a Gamecock uniform, often getting steals that turn into fast-break points. Her on-ball defense is aided with her long wingspan and quick hands.

Talent isn't a question for the curious Cooper, but finding consistent playing time in the crowded and experienced guard rotation is the natural challenge she's facing. This isn't uncommon for freshmen in Staley's system, especially at the guard spot.

"The window of opportunity for her to play is small, so when she does play, she has to do something with it," Staley said. "Or else it closes quickly because we have other players that just step right in, and they're able to do what they do."

Graduate senior Kierra Fletcher and redshirt-freshman Raven Johnson take up the bulk of the minutes at point guard. Senior guard and leading scorer Zia Cooke sometimes handles the ball, but mostly sees time at the two-guard.

There have been times this season where Cooper has played 20 or more minutes, times where she has played fewer than 10 and times where she did not enter the game at all.

Cooper has had success on the court against the team's nonconference opponents, though the rigor of SEC play has taken control of USC's remaining schedule.

"Once we add her approach and her preparation to this game, it's gonna be easier for her to do what she does best," Staley said. "So that's gonna take some time."

Cooper is learning her place on the team and continues to inquire about ways to get better. Bringing the ball up is one of her primary duties, so she wants to be cautious with the way that she handles the rock.

"As a freshman, they're gonna pick on you," Cooper said. "They'll take the ball from you. My biggest goal is to not let them do that."

Cooper's game has come along nicely behind closed doors, at least to Cooke.

Cooke recalled former Gamecock Tyasha Harris giving her guidance when she first arrived, and now she has the opportunity to do the same for the inquisitive Cooper.

"She's one that always comes to me asking me questions," Cooke told The State. "She always wants to know my opinion on things, and I try to sit her down and have conversations with her the same way Ty used to do with me. Just give her the knowledge of the game for as long as I'm here to help her."

Cooper is one of the team's three true freshmen, with Ashlyn Watkins and Chloe Kitts the others.

Three members of South Carolina's 2019 recruiting class — Cooke, Brea Beal and Aliyah Boston — started in each game they played as freshmen. The circumstances were a bit different, though, because many key players from the previous year had departed.

This year's USC returned four of five starters and 10 players total from the national championship run.

"Aliyah's not Aliyah four years ago," Staley said. "She had some holes in her game. Zia had some holes in her game. Brea Beal, holes. Now, you're seeing the finished product. And sometimes, that's hard for a young person to see. They made some of the same mistakes you're making right now, and she's just gotta work through it."

With help from her more experienced teammates, Cooper has been able to keep things in perspective.

"Keep going," her older teammates have told her. "It's a process."

###



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Why South Carolina women's basketball defensive versatility is most important weapon

Emily Adams, Greenville News
January 19, 2023

South Carolina women's basketball knows what dominant defense looks like. It was the Gamecocks' calling card en route to the 2022 NCAA championship, led by Naismith Defensive Player of the Year Aliyah Boston.

In South Carolina's 96-48 rout of Vanderbilt (9-11, 0-6 SEC) on Thursday, Boston played only 22 minutes and logged just one of her 10 rebounds on defense. It was junior Kamilla Cardoso who led the team in defensive rebounding with nine of her 15 total.

South Carolina improved to (18-0, 7-0) for the season and has won 25 straight dating back to last season.

Point guard Kierra Fletcher logged a career-high three blocks after entering the game with four on the season and put up five defensive rebounds. Fletcher also put up a 56.9% stop rate against the Commodores, second only to senior Laeticia Amihere's spectacular 89.6% rate. Amihere led the team in steals with two, while splitting top blocker with Fletcher and Boston, all of whom logged three.

"We're versatile. We can switch, and we communicate extremely well," coach Dawn Staley said. "We make a concerted effort to defend. We don't like when people score on us, so we take it really personal, and we're made up that way. We were intentional about making sure that we kept people in front of us and used our ability to block shots to swat some away."

Then there's Brea Beal, who has emerged as a legitimate offensive threat in addition to her one-on-one defensive ability. The senior made 63 3-pointers over 37 games in 2021-22, but has already scored 44 in 19 games this season. She is shooting a career-best 43% from the field and is one assist shy of passing her total of 47 from last season with 10 regular-season games remaining.

Beal was the Gamecocks' fourth-highest scorer with nine points against Vanderbilt in a game where 11 different players recorded points. She also upheld her typical role as a defensive juggernaut with two blocks and a rebound while helping hold Cijaja Harbison, who averages 19 points per game, to just nine. Beal and the South Carolina defense gave up a single field goal attempt to Harbison in the first half and kept No. 2 scorer Marnelle Garraud to 15 points after she put up 31 on Arkansas.

"It's been four years and I'm thinking where do I want to be and wanting to give myself a chance to compete at that pro level," Beal said. "It just starts with the summer getting shots in day in and day out and asking Coach what I need to do to become a pro and practice pro habits. It's been a lot of assessing myself and figuring out what I need to do."

Everywhere opponents turn, the Gamecocks find a response. In seven SEC games, South Carolina has held every team's leading scorer below their season average. The stifling defense is effective regardless of a star's skillset: Mississippi State's Jessika Carter is a 6-foot-5 center who prefers to dominate the paint, while 5-foot-7 Garraud is most effective as a 3-point sharpshooter.

The reigning national champions will need those defensive options as the stars get bigger and bigger down the schedule. LSU's Angel Reese is a national player of the year contender averaging 23.9 points and 15.4 rebounds. Sophomore prodigy Azzi Fudd will anchor UConn if she is healthy in time for the Feb. 5 matchup. Tennessee's Jordan Horston, who averages 25.5 points, will be hungry to face South Carolina after missing last year's game with a season-ending injury.

"We get everybody's best. Everybody wants to do what Missouri did to us last year and what Kentucky did to us in the SEC championships," Staley said. "We're getting that every single time, and we're used to it ... and we're getting better. We are a really good team that's getting better."

###



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Gamecocks' Raven Johnson soars into starring role after lost season

David Cloninger, *Charleston Post & Courier*
January 27, 2023

COLUMBIA — Raven Johnson sped upcourt at Kentucky's Memorial Coliseum, already computing the options. Following her theft of a Wildcats' possession, she knew she had the edge and the footwork to escape the defender setting up to hem her in and get to the rim for a layup, but she also saw teammate Bree Hall on the opposite side of the court.

With a hint of a smile, Johnson slowed just a bit, allowing Kentucky to bring another defender rushing over for a potential double-team. Just before they closed ranks, Johnson zipped a pass quicker than a cobra's strike through the thinning gap and watched Hall receive the bounce, take a step and put the ball off glass and in.

Point-guard thinking: Find your teammates before you attempt to shoot. Coach Dawn Staley would be pleased.

Mom was more pleased.

"Know what? She's only at about 80 to 85 percent," said Shekia Johnson, Raven's mother. "When she turns all the way on, she's a defensive nightmare. She can steal a ball out the side of her eye.

"You haven't seen nothing yet."

Opponents are believing it. Lost to a knee injury in just the second game last year, Johnson's true freshman season was stolen. She was there when her teammates won the national championship, but she couldn't participate; her learning was strictly on the bench and in the film room instead of with the ball in her hands.

This is really her freshman year, Johnson behind starting point guard Kierra Fletcher, who is averaging only six seconds more per game than Johnson (15.8 minutes to 15.6). Yet while she's not playing even a full half of a game, Johnson's 64 assists far and away lead the Gamecocks, and her 24 steals are on top, too.

"Basketball doesn't have an age to it, that's how I feel. If you can play, you can play," Johnson said after that Kentucky win. "Just getting my rhythm back, having my teammates pushing me every day, telling me they know I can do this or that."

Said Staley, "When she does come in, she shoots herself out of a cannon and everybody's running with her. She has a great ability to see the floor and put people in positions to just shoot the ball or score the layup. You don't have to waste your dribble, you don't have to waste movement, because she puts you in a great position."

Killa and Thrilla

Before Johnson was the Naismith High School Player of the Year and the first girl to ever play in a boys' All-American Game (2021 Iverson Classic), there were the tennis balls.

"A coach I had a long time ago said, 'You want quick hands, you got to do something about it,'" said Shekia, an elite high-school two-guard herself. "I would hold a tennis ball at my chest, while she had her hands at her waist, palms down. I'd drop them and she had to catch them."

The tennis balls made their way into other drills — even juggling — as Shekia coached Raven into becoming a student and lover of the game. It helped that she had another alongside: Her twin brother, Richard.

"Once we started playing them in basketball games, they got their nicknames," Shekia proudly says. "Killa and Thrilla. Thrilla because Richard was a smooth lefty, Killa because Raven was aggressive and left no breathing room on defense."

Killa, predicting the future (and channeling what her future head coach did as a youth), played with the boys even when she had to get special permission to do so. In the advanced AAU youth tournaments that took places in New Orleans or Washington, Raven always stood out.

That led to dominating the competition throughout middle and high school and listening intently when Staley laid out the plan for her college career. Yes, her freshman season would be competing with senior Destanni Henderson for the starting job, but she'd play, and in 2022-23, she could presumably take over, although there would always be battles in practice.

To be coached by one of the greatest point guards in history and to join a team that was close to home and already in championship mode?

Easy choice.

Wings clipped

South Dakota was painful. When Johnson crumpled to the floor on Nov. 12, 2021, she knew something was horribly wrong.

She flew back with the team from Sioux Falls with a win but uncertain future and the diagnosis confirmed her ACL had split. Her season would be one of rehabilitation and healing.

"She was down for the first week but Raven is a big believer in faith," Shekia said. "She started going to church — (Laeticia Amihere) introduced her to a pastor — and she became OK with it. She told herself, 'I'll get back.'"

The surgery offered an encouraging sign, as the doctors told her after she woke up that when they went in, her knee had already started to heal itself around the torn ligament. The natural strength she already possessed had her ahead of schedule.

Staley had to bring in another point guard just for experience's sake — Fletcher, from Georgia Tech, who had also missed 2021-22 season with a foot injury — but the two competed with each other in preseason practice.

It's become symbiotic.



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"Raven Johnson's an elite passer. I think that's helping (Kierra) become a better passer because once you see it and you see people set an example for how it can be done, she's become better," Staley said. "I think Raven's become a better manager of the game, setting up, and slowing down, and running our sets, because she sees Key."

Flying high

"Honestly, I just saw three people out there. Coach has told me to work on my change of speed, I was on kind of a retreat dribble, but I seen Breezy coming, so I was like, 'Oh! They're looking for me to score,'" Johnson said of the play at Kentucky. "So I tried to dump it into that little zone and it happened."

Spotlight plays are starting to appear on social media as announcers and women's analysts marvel at the skill. Opponents, with equal consternation and despair, are muttering, "This is the backup? Who's third string? Sue Bird?"

"Raven is such a team player, she doesn't worry about her or what she does, she worries about the W at the end," Shekia said. "If there's a player at a better angle, she's going to give it up. She's humble, she's not going to think about herself."

Henderson scored a career-high 26 points in last year's national championship game. It was a killer performance.

Killa watched from the sideline, and is ready to repeat.

###



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

South Carolina's Brea Beal may be nation's best defender. Is that enough for the WNBA?

Chantel Jennings, The Athletic
February 3, 2023

Brea Beal is well aware of the shadow that follows her in WNBA scouting reports. But she also knows that her shadow happens to be her greatest strength for South Carolina women's basketball: She's a defensive stopper, arguably the best in the country on the perimeter.

For the past few seasons, defense has been her calling card. In every game, coach Dawn Staley tasks her with defending opponents' most explosive perimeter players, and in almost every game she holds them to well below their season averages while also forcing more turnovers than players would like. (And even in games when an opponent's statistical output is on average, the route to those points is certainly made harder by Beal.)

Yet entering her final season of college basketball, Beal knew she had to show more to prove herself as a potential future WNBA contributor. She realizes limited roster spots are available for rookies and that being a top defensive player alone doesn't cut it. After all, four of the five players on last year's WNBA All-Defensive team were also among the top 20 scorers in the league (per game).

"I'm just trying to prove that I'm an all-around player, and I also want to prove that for my size, I'm able to move and get up and down the floor," said Beal, a 6-foot-1 wing. "I've shown that I can defend players who have gone top five ... but I also want to prove that I can give on both sides of the court."

So far, Beal has shown that to an extent. Though she's still averaging just 5.1 points per game, she's registering career highs with 3-point shooting of 40 percent, 2.4 assists per game and 0.9 turnovers per game. She is a necessary piece of South Carolina's plan to repeat as national champions, and she's a frustration to every opposing coach who has to figure out ways to get around her.

But is that enough to draw WNBA interest?

"People are intrigued because of her athleticism and defensive ability," one WNBA general manager said. "But in order to make it in our league she has to become an offensive factor."

That GM explained that Beal's college film has been difficult to evaluate simply because of the Gamecocks' style. With South Carolina's offense focused on getting the ball into the paint, and the majority of those touches going to presumptive No. 1 pick Aliyah Boston and Kamilla Cardoso, WNBA teams simply don't have a ton of video of Beal facing significant defensive pressure.

And there isn't much precedent for players who didn't score much in college to become offensive contributors in the league. Another GM said Beal's future at the next level will come down to a targeted fit: Is there a specific WNBA team, one that's more defensive-minded and willing to invest in young talent, that would draft Beal and bring her into camp?

Indiana and Dallas seemingly fit the bill. Fever GM Lin Dunn emphasized defense with her picks last season, and Latricia Trammell, the Wings' new coach, ran the Sparks' defense the last few seasons. (Additionally, Dallas has emphasized defense with previous coaches and drafts.) Both teams are rebuilding under first-year coaches, and both have a defensive focus with plenty of youth on the roster.

But regardless of where Beal could end up, every staff will find itself asking the same questions: How do you go about scouting future offensive contributions of a defense-focused player? And how do you determine if her lack of scoring truly is just a lack of opportunity?

These questions didn't always swirl around Beal. During Beal's recruitment, Staley assumed Beal would eventually become a linchpin in the Gamecocks' offense. She put up 2,720 career points in high school and was named Illinois' Ms. Basketball three times (2017, 2018, 2019). The only other player to accomplish that feat? Candace Parker.

But Parker went on to average 19 points a game at Tennessee as the featured player. Beal has never averaged more than seven points per game in a season, operating as the fourth or fifth scoring option on the Gamecocks' deep roster every season.

Staley sees that as another reason why WNBA teams should take a hard look at Beal. Despite her tremendous offensive potential, she was also keen enough to recognize the Gamecocks needed a player who could contain opponents' top scoring threats — and she willingly stepped into that role and developed as a defensive weapon. Though Beal has accepted a smaller offensive role, she hasn't threatened to blow up the undefeated Gamecocks offense just to prove anything about herself and her game.

"We could ask her to do anything, and she would be really good at it," Staley said. "We didn't say take a back seat to anything or anybody. But there are some people that can just feel what needs to happen. And she's one of them."

"There's a value to players like that — she's low maintenance and high value."

Beal isn't paying too much attention to those projections and question marks. Right now, her focus is on doing what she can to make No. 1 South Carolina repeat as national champs, and she knows that her biggest contribution to that effort is keeping opponents in front of her. Next on the list? UConn's Lou Lopez Sénéchal, who has stepped up as one of the Huskies' top players amid a season of injuries in Storrs. On Sunday in Hartford, Beal will try to keep the three-level scorer from being too productive in the rematch of the 2022 national championship.

While Beal is letting her play speak for itself, Staley is happy to send a very clear message to WNBA teams tuning in for the marquee game: "Brea Beal is somebody that can make your franchise better in a lot of ways."



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

How 1 a.m. workouts help Chloe Kitts find her footing with South Carolina women's basketball

Emily Adams, Greenville News
February 9, 2023

COLUMBIA — Chloe Kitts feels the most at peace on an empty gym floor.

When the South Carolina women's basketball freshman can't sleep or just needs to get out of her head, she takes the minute-long walk from her dorm to the Gamecocks' practice facility. She works out on her own, sometimes until 2 or 3 a.m., finding a meditative state in the echoing bounce of the ball and electric hum of the fluorescent lights.

"I prefer working out late ... I just have a lot of thoughts, and working out makes it better," Kitts said. "It's my alone time for sure ... I'll have the whole gym for a couple hours and I'll shoot, then lay on the floor, then shoot. I love it alone."

But the solitude doesn't always offer solace. Kitts signed with the Gamecocks' 2023 class but decided to enroll early in late December. Jumpstarting her career puts Kitts in an unusual position: She's behind compared to the 2022 freshman class but is now months ahead of the other signees in her year.

The freshman joined the Gamecocks' roster fewer than six weeks after announcing her commitment Nov. 4. She was a five-star prospect ranked No. 17 in the 2023 class, and her father Jason barely introduced the discussion of early enrollment until after Kitts picked South Carolina.

Jason runs a non-profit organization focused on youth basketball development in Central Florida, so his experience led him to advocate for Kitts arriving ahead of schedule.

"I absolutely wanted Chloe Kitts at South Carolina this year so she could understand what the roles and the leadership looks like at that level," Jason said. "Is it hard? Absolutely. But that's part of the process of understanding that hard is going to lead to bigger and better things."

The move was unprecedented, especially because of the Gamecocks' already-deep roster. In the first nine games, coach Dawn Staley played all 13 players in four games, and her rotation was fewer than 12 just once. Kitts made an impressive debut with 10 points, seven rebounds and two steals in her first appearance against Charleston Southern on Dec. 18, but the freshman's confidence started to waver early in SEC play.

"When I first got here, that first game I felt confident but ... I'm very hard on myself," Kitts said. "I expect a lot from myself, so when I'm not doing very good I have a lot of negative talk. I've always been like that, but it's kind of gotten worse. (Staley) always tells me turn the page, don't be scared when you're out there and it's OK to make mistakes."

Jason said the biggest challenge of the process for Chloe is her playing time. The 6-foot-2 forward has appeared in 10 of 14 games she was eligible for, averaging nine minutes. She averages 2.5 points and 2.6 rebounds per game.

"It is what it is when you're on the No. 1 team in the country ... You have McDonald's All-Americans that are sophomores that are playing few minutes a game," Jason said. "The (Alabama) game, Chloe didn't get in, but her mindset and demeanor that we saw on the bench were great. At the beginning of January, she was still in that mental state of not really figuring things out yet. Now, it's like, 'OK, I'm here and I'm just going to continue to keep working.'"

Kitts has also grown comfortable in Columbia thanks to her friendship with senior Olivia Thompson. The pair initially connected on the Gamecocks' road trip to South Dakota State, two days after Kitts officially enrolled.

"I was sitting next to her and she just starts picking on me. I was like, 'I don't even know you,'" Thompson laughed. "There was a sub and she didn't stand up. She was like the only one who didn't stand up, and she hit me and was like why didn't you tell me to stand up? She's a funny kid."

Thompson often takes Kitts on errands — they love to hit Ulta Beauty and Whole Foods — just to have her company. Thompson understands some of the isolated feelings Kitts experienced. She committed to the Gamecocks as a walk-on among the elite 2019 class of current starters Aliyah Boston, Zia Cooke, Brea Beal and Victaria Saxton.

"It took me until my sophomore year to get comfortable really being free, but she's very comfortable within herself," Thompson said. "She's very mentally strong, and that's something you have to be to be successful, especially in this program."

As much as she values her alone time in the gym, Kitts is ready for the rest of her class to arrive on campus. She knows that she will need to be the kind of support system for them that Thompson has been for her.

"I want to be a great teammate, because when the freshmen come next year, I'm someone they're going to look up to for help, because ... I know exactly how they're going to feel," Kitts said. "I need to get better at that as well, so I'm just trying to take in everything the seniors are saying to me."

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2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

USC's Dawn Staley is getting a statue in Columbia. Here's what we know

Sarah Ellis, The State
February 9, 2023

COLUMBIA—University of South Carolina women's basketball Coach Dawn Staley will be honored with a statue in downtown Columbia.

Columbia Mayor Daniel Rickenmann told *The State* the city plans to erect a statue at the corner of Main and Gervais streets across from the S.C. State House, "so that everyone who comes through Columbia can see that, and it can be a reminder to everyone that opportunity is what you make of it, and nobody can stand in your way."

A design for the statue is still in the works, and an unveiling could be about a year away.

"It's going to be a reminder to every young girl that, 'I have the ability and I have an equal value, and nobody should forget about that,'" Rickenmann said.

The statue is being created in partnership with international arts funding group Statues for Equality, a group that aims to "balance gender and racial representation in public statues" around the world.

Staley, the mayor said, has been an ambassador for leveling the playing field for girls and women in sports, pushing for equal funding, attention and respect as men's sports. She and the university have already been consulted on the statue, and a rendering is in the works, the mayor's office said.

"I come from humble beginnings, a place where there are no statues honoring people like me," Staley said in an email release. "So to have such an honor bestowed upon me, is incredibly special. I hope that a young girl or boy who is growing up the way I did sees this as a way forward and a path toward their own dreams."

Rickenmann expects about a 12-month timeline to complete the statue once the design is finalized.

The project is expected to cost \$140,000, with half of the funding coming from Statues for Equality and half committed by local business people, the mayor's office said.

"What the (USC women's basketball) team has done is not only show excellent grace, at the same time, they've stood up for trying to level the playing field in sports," Rickenmann said. "I'm excited that we have a coach who has really embraced our community and at the same time has really empowered her athletes to stand up tall every day."

In 14 years coaching the Gamecocks, Staley has brought home two national championship trophies and vaulted the team into the perennial national spotlight. Among her myriad accomplishments, Staley has been named the national coach of the year three times and is USC's all-time winningest basketball coach — men's or women's.

"Coach Staley is a fantastic ambassador for the university, the city and for women's basketball," USC Athletics Director Ray Tanner said in a statement. "Through her leadership and tenacity on and off the court, she exemplifies what it means to be a Gamecock. This planned statue would hopefully inspire excellence in generations to come."

The city was approached by Statues for Equality, Rickenmann said, and put in a bid for funding for a statue of Staley.

"We're going to be working with the coach on the right pictures and pose, and the artist will be providing us with the renderings," the mayor said.

The Staley statue will be the second structure honoring a USC women's basketball star in the capital city.

In January 2021, USC unveiled an 11-foot bronze statue of Gamecock great A'ja Wilson, a Columbia native who helped lead the team to its first national championship in 2017. Also an Olympic gold medalist, Wilson has gone on to star in the WNBA with the Las Vegas Aces, bringing home the league championship and her second WNBA MVP trophy last season.

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'WBB vs. Everybody': The electrifying power of Dawn Staley's legion of fans

*Sarah Ellis, The State
February 11, 2023*

COLUMBIA — They're nicer than Gamecock football fans, louder than baseball fans, more numerous than men's basketball fans and prouder than arguably any other fan base at the University of South Carolina, and maybe in the country.

USC women's basketball fandom — diverse, loyal, deeply engaged and notoriously well-traveled — might be one of a kind in college sports today. And it's helping grow popularity for the sport far beyond the stands of Colonial Life Arena, which, by the way, regularly hosts more fans than any other NCAA women's basketball arena in the nation.

Fans of coach Dawn Staley's perennial powerhouse team have become fans of the WNBA, and they follow the competition among other college teams all season long.

Are the Gamecocks and their fans — er, fans — single-handedly driving the growth of women's basketball? That's a stretch. But there's no denying the influence Staley and the legion of loyal fans behind her are having on the sport.

"I can only speak for our fans and what they've created here," Staley told *The State* earlier this season. "They are knowledgeable, like they know about women's basketball across the country. They are loyal. They are possessive. They're fighters, they fight our battles. They fight our social media battles. They've created friendships when they come and they've been around each other over the past few years. It's a pretty cool development of how things have turned out this way."

As the heat turns up ahead of Sunday's No. 1 vs. No. 3 showdown against LSU, fans are crowding about the sellout crowd at Columbia's 18,000-seat Colonial Life Arena. Some resale tickets were going for as high as \$1,100 apiece late in the week.

Beneath the glow of two national championship banners — and humming with hunger for more — a crowd of old and young, male and female, diehards and newcomers swells with passion and pure love for the 14 young women in garnet on that Colonial Life hardwood.

"Electrifying," said Lisa Gadson, a Columbia resident and University of South Carolina graduate who attends most every home game.

Fans line up outside the arena more than an hour before games. They wear T-shirts that say "Worth," in recognition of the team's 2021-22 theme, and hoodies that say "WBB vs. Everybody," meaning it's the Gamecocks against the world. They erupt as one in fits of elation and anger. They stay in the stands 'til the end of the game.

"Oh, it's hot. It's very high energy," said Robert Reese, who works concessions at the arena. "And the fact that you talk about sellouts ... and you see people outside with signs saying, 'I need tickets.' It's energetic, and the top players want to come here now because ... the fact that they've been seeing on this scale if you work hard, produce hard, play hard, this is what you can achieve."

Years ago, it would have been laughable to imagine crowds and an atmosphere like today's at a women's basketball game in Columbia.

Reese and others working at the arena say they remember when fans numbered in the mere hundreds in the pre-Staley and early-Staley eras.

"Oh yeah, I've worked here when we had other cultures, and we had about 200 people in the seats or so," said Angela Webster, who has worked at Colonial Life Arena since it opened 20 years ago, and at the Carolina Coliseum before that. She works USC football and baseball games, too, and nothing compares to the women's basketball crowds, she said.

These days, a women's basketball crowd can outshine the audience for any other USC sport — save for football in the 77,000-seat Williams-Brice stadium — nearly any day of the week.

The Gamecocks have led the nation in fan attendance every year since the 2014-15 season — discounting the 2020-21 COVID year. The average attendance this season is almost 12,500 fans, or 2,000 more tickets sold per game than their counterparts on the USC men's team.

The fans buying those women's basketball tickets, their tenor, their personality, are not like other USC fans.

"I think our crowd looks much different than any crowd that attends any sporting event here on campus," Staley said. "That's a really cool thing."

The differences in the fans are "hard to explain," said Webster.

"This feels very much like family, like buddies and friendly, and everybody wanting the same thing," Webster said. "Football, to me, is not a friendly atmosphere. But baseball is not as intense as this; it's more laid back, and it's an older fan base, but it's also a very mild atmosphere. ... (At women's basketball games), I can see how many people got to know each other, and they go on these buses to away games, and they're all together. ..."

"This is just fun."

STALEY MADE THE DIFFERENCE

Ask anyone how the fan base grew to be this way, and all fingers point to Staley, the founder and the center of the culture.

A Hall of Fame player and coach, Staley was the change agent inside Colonial Life Arena, taking a team that went 17-16 in the 2007-08 season before her hiring and turning it into two-time national champions.

"She changed the atmosphere and the culture. It took time, of course, and the support the university gave to her. It gave her that freedom and room to grow," said Michelle Yeater, a season ticket-holder from Prosperity who attends games with her partner, Susan Jordan, and their three kids, Christian, Kaleigh and Jesse.

"She is iconic, she is epic, and she is the epitome — I mean, her reach is just global," said Columbia's Gadson. "All the accomplishments of what she's made. She's extremely humble, and she's extremely down to earth, and she makes you feel like you are a family with the team."



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Before Staley, Gadson said she didn't know anything about women's basketball. Now, she's not just a Gamecocks fan. She's watching WNBA games to follow "our A'ja" — A'ja Wilson, the Columbia native and former USC star who just won a WNBA championship with the Las Vegas Aces. A statue of "our A'ja" stands outside the Colonial Life Arena's main entrance.

At the same time, the WNBA recorded its most-watched season in two decades in 2022, The Associated Press reported, with media coverage, viewership and sponsorship deals on the rise across the sport.

It's harder for a women's sport to grow a fan base of this magnitude; even the fans themselves acknowledge that fact.

"They've got to get their name out there to get the crowds in, whereas the guys, the crowds come automatically," said Yeater, a fan who also works with girls' sports. "The expectation is the men's program is going to always be there; there's always going to be fan support there. ... Women's sports, we've got to prove ourselves. We've got to make a statement, and that's what Dawn has done. So that's the big difference."

Before the success of Staley's program, many of today's die-hard USC fans, like Gadson, say they never cared to watch the sport at all. The team's personality and intention to connect with the community beyond the court have been as important as wins — and the Gamecocks have delivered many of them in recent years, amassing a 390-105 record under Staley.

It's about much more than the wins for the fans. It's the way Staley speaks to fans, draws them in, walks beside them. The way she calls them family.

The payoff is evident in the stands.

PRIDE OF THE COMMUNITY

USC women's basketball fans have staked a claim on Columbia as a city whose identity is increasingly built on the fame of a women's sports team. Few places in the United States could say the same.

"We're part of this community," Staley said. "The community feels like they are a part of our team. And that's pretty cool. When it's a mutual feeling like that, it produces something that's organic and probably envied to a certain degree."

Columbia Mayor Daniel Rickenmann was one of the thousands of cheering admirers who filled Main Street last April to celebrate Staley, her team and their second national championship. The calls for a celebration parade began just moments after the championship game buzzer, the mayor said, and all of Columbia tingled with anticipation for days leading up to the team's parade through the heart of the city.

The moment that still sticks with him most from that afternoon came after the parade, Rickenmann said, as he watched Staley take picture after picture with fans, hug after hug, handshake after handshake.

"And everybody is trying to get her away, but she kept on doing it and kept on doing it," Rickenmann remembered. "And she made people feel like they were a part of that success, and thanking those fans for being there and cheering them on."

The team's place in the city at large soon will be cemented at a prominent corner of downtown Columbia, where a statue of Staley is planned to be erected about a year from now across the street from the S.C. State House. It will be a visible statement of the value of women's basketball in the capital city, and "a reminder to every young girl that, 'I have the ability and I have an equal value, and nobody should forget about that,'" Rickenmann said.

The unusually broad spectrum of support for the team in Columbia lifts the entire city, he added.

When downtown swells with women's basketball fans for Sunday's sellout game against LSU, those fans and the national audience tuning in on television will get a chance to see the best of Columbia, the mayor said.

One high-profile game after another, their influence across Columbia and the nation only looks to grow larger.

"When you have players who acknowledge their fan base like these young ladies do, and they put their best foot forward every time, people appreciate that," Rickenmann said. "They want to be part of that. And I think as long as they continue to do that and they acknowledge that fan base, it's going to stay that way."

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2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Kamilla 'The Separator' Cardoso settles into form in USC's rout of LSU

*David Cloninger, Charleston Post & Courier
February 14, 2023*

COLUMBIA — If it was strictly intimidation without talent, it would show.

LSU was hoping the sight of 6-foot-7 South Carolina center Kamilla Cardoso was a mirage and would soon disappear, but she didn't. The Tigers thought they could perhaps still work their inside game, and play enough defense to remove Cardoso from the equation, but that never happened.

There was a sound like a sledgehammer bursting a watermelon as Cardoso's hand slammed into the ball shortly after it left Alexis Morris' hand, a "PAM!" that let all of the 18,000 packed into Colonial Life Arena know that it wasn't a fingertip affecting the ball's flight. It was all palm, a violent rejection that came with a message.trophy last season.

That being, "Don't try that again. I'm here to stay."

Cardoso's biggest enemy has been inconsistency, and there were a few times during Sunday's 88-64 vivisection of then-No. 3 LSU where she let a rebound glance off her hands or missed a shot under the basket.

But the rest of it ...

Cardoso led the Gamecocks with 18 points. She also led with 13 rebounds. She tied Aliyah Boston with three blocks.

She only missed two shots from the field, and was perfect from the line, a highlight considering Cardoso only shoots 67 percent there. Most importantly, she stole the Tigers' soul, letting them know through her play that it was going to be a long day.

To its credit, LSU kept punching back, doing whatever it had to do to get points. It was still a close game in the third quarter. Then Cardoso blocked that Morris layup.

The lead never dropped below 10 again.

"You see glimpses of it all the time. I've always said that she's a difference-maker," coach Dawn Staley said. "She's a separator. If we don't get her production, it's probably a lot closer game than what it was."

"Kamilla's really long. She uses her length to her advantage. Teams struggle to finish around her because they probably don't want to get their shot blocked, to be honest," Boston added. "She goes to score, she rebounds the ball really well and she just makes it hard for teams.

"Coach says all the time, 'She's our separator,' and I think every time she gets on the floor, she just dominates."

There's that word again, "separator." What Cardoso is to the Gamecocks is the player who turns a close game into a rout. Staley always knew what she had when she could put Cardoso in the game beside the 6-5 Boston, but Cardoso had to live up to her height, and hype, before it could really take effect.

It's come, slowly. She scored 16 points with nine boards against UCLA. Cardoso had nine and nine in a tough win at Mississippi State. Then came Connecticut, with 17 and 11.

LSU did what every other opponent does and wrote, "Don't let Cardoso erupt" on the scouting report. But like every other opponent, it was answered with, "How do we do that, exactly?"

"Boy, do they use that paint," marveled LSU coach Kim Mulkey. "When you're that big and tall, I'm going to stay in that paint until they make me get out, because they really do know how to post up good."

It's a luxury of riches that always presented a fearsome picture on the court, but the Gamecocks had to nurse Cardoso along until she could start dominating games.

She's arrived, separating herself from just being tall into a force that is separating South Carolina from its closest competition.

###



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

'It's South Carolina ... and everybody else': Dawn Staley has built an empire

*Chuck Culpepper, The Washington Post
February 15, 2023*

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Here in the happy empire, the waitress learns you've traveled in and wonders which side you're on for the colossus of a game upcoming. The winter sky broods and leaks on a Sunday, but the 18,000 trudge the sidewalks, get inside and fill the concourses with impasses. The towels inside wave with enough frenzy that you might think bygone generations that used to pooh-pooh women's sports deserve a fresh lampooning.

The empire wins as it has 299 times out of 338 over the past 10 seasons, and fans bunch around the court greeting the stars who greet back, and the coach roams around high-fiving the fans, and the whole big bliss of it exceeds even what the remarkable individual who helms it foresaw 15 years before she got here.

"You know, I never envisioned what the crowd looked like when I took the job here," said Dawn Staley, South Carolina women's basketball coach, winner of two national titles, maker of four Final Fours. "I just wanted to win. I wanted to put a product on the floor that, really, people could be proud of. And I didn't see the crowd — like, I didn't say, 'Let's fill Colonial Life Arena.' I never — they did it. Our fans did it. They just, you know, word-of-mouth, came in here and decided that we're going to back this team and we're going to make it look like what a national championship team looks like prior to us even winning a national championship. So you've got to have that look, got to have that support, and our fans have done it how many years?"

She is told it's eight since the crowds started cresting to lead the country as they do, and she says: "Well, before then, there was like, you know, five [thousand] was a great feat. Now if 5,000 people come in here, something's really wrong. Something's really wrong if only 5,000 fans are here."

No. 1 South Carolina (25-0) just had itself two fine Sundays as it runs around amassing zeniths. It went up to Hartford where the ice sat around on the Park River and overhauled No. 5 Connecticut, the program Staley called "the standard," for Staley's first win up there, after which exhilarating young guard Raven Johnson said, "We wanted to break history." Then it came back home, went up 18-2 on then-unbeaten No. 3 LSU, saw the Tigers nibble that lead almost away and then put down the 88-64 clamp so that LSU Coach Kim Mulkey said, "It's South Carolina, in my opinion, and everybody else."

With rebound upon rebound and layup upon layup from this team both tall and large, the feats for 15 years keep piling up until the big seems the norm. "Thinking about it [three] years ago," star Aliyah Boston said, "I mean, just thinking back to our U-Conn. game [in February 2020] because that was a sellout, the first sellout of my career here, and it was, like — nervous. I was very nervous. I was, 'Oh, gosh, there's a lot of people.' But now, just thinking about it, we're — [it's] just like the regular."

It's curious to think about May 2008, when the eternal Philadelphian Staley came from Temple as the hire of then-athletic director Eric Hyman, when it seemed a notch offbeat. The Tennessee empire sprang from Pat Summitt, lifelong Tennessean. Geno Auriemma of Connecticut didn't hail from Connecticut, but Pennsylvania isn't really all that far. Tara VanDerveer went from the northeast to California, but that trail long since has its traffic. Muffet McGraw went from Pennsylvania to Notre Dame in northern Indiana.

When Staley arrived and said: "Some people may ask, 'Why South Carolina?' And I say, 'Why not?'" Joseph Person of the State newspaper noted that it echoed then-football coach Steve Spurrier. South Carolina had ingredients Staley craved. "The facilities are here," she said at her first news conference. "The commitment's here — the community and the people who want to be a part of a winning program."

She did fret aloud about restaurants closing early even in this state capital with a 33,000-strong university and a 137,000-strong population. To an American Southeast long since artistic at sugarcoating, here came a 38-year-old former two-time national player of the year at Virginia with a gaudy CV and an aversion to sugarcoating.

There began a long run of coaching that has grown to eminent and commentary that stays earnest, honest and chatty. ("Okay, even local media is here," she said of four traveling reporters in Connecticut, a signal of an empire. "Shout-out to your bosses for opening their budget up.") Her news conferences go longer than some even as a tyro of a listener might wish they would go longer, given her listenability on topics from personnel decisions to Randall Cunningham, whose vintage No. 12 jersey she wore Sunday. ("I mean, Randall, Randall was a ceiling-breaker when it was probably not very popular to have a Black quarterback. In Philadelphia, I don't really think they care. They want to win — like, we want winners.")

If there's a one-human window on how South Carolina became an empire after some good sprinkles of past success — 1980 Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women Final Four, 2002 Elite Eight, among others — it could be Mike Sullivan, 77-year-old retired psychologist.

He first witnessed women's basketball late last century in Washington — Summitt's Tennessee at George Washington — and he joined those from John Wooden to Paolo Banchero who have found it preferable to the men's game for the fuller teamwork entailed. He frequented Mystics games from 1999 to 2005, before he and his wife, Susan, moved to Tampa.

When they aimed for elsewhere and checked out Columbia in February 2008, he reveled that he would get to see SEC powerhouses such as Tennessee and LSU, "little realizing we'd be having our own powerhouse." Soon, at the dawn of Dawn, they let in fans to choose season ticket spots. He moseyed on up to the seventh row above the half-court stripe, pegging that as ideal vantage. There, early on, he would sit among 2,500 or whatever in an 18,000-seat arena, meaning, "You could hear yourself think."

Well, those seats nowadays ...

"She's really a transcendent figure," he said. "She is the most unassuming, most accessible person of her stature that I can imagine." He lines up for games with "a cross-section of all ages, all races, all walks of life, people in line talking with each other. They're interacting; they're laughing. It is such a warm, embracing feeling that I think it's part of the appeal of going to games." He finds it "unbelievable" how she has "changed the tenor of the city," as with two championship parades during which, he said: "She was like a rock star! People were going crazy with excitement. Through the parade, she's signing autographs, she's taking selfies."

When he misses the home game this Thursday against Florida because his doctor said so, it will become his first miss of any Staley-era home game other than in the 2020-21 season of coronavirus-cribbed crowds. He said Staley calls him and some others "Day Oners." He often has tweeted relevant stats, and Staley often has tweeted in reply. It's part of her approach, of a piece with her tour of courtside Sunday high-fiving fans.

"I mean, we built our success on that kind of access," she said. "It's just a lot more now. And, I mean, I feel the energy. They are happy, like genuinely happy for us winning, because they feel like they were part of it. When you feel like you're part of it, I've got to meet you where you are. I meet our fans where they are, and they want pictures, they want autographs, they want selfies, they want it all. And I want them to keep coming back, so taking that walk around the court is par for the course for us."



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Now, announced last week, Columbia will have its third statue of a Gamecock luminary. Over at the football stadium there's 1980 Heisman Trophy winner George Rogers. Back at the basketball arena there's 2017 national champion and WNBA star A'ja Wilson. Rogers hailed from suburban Atlanta in Duluth, Wilson from Columbia itself.

Well, across from the statehouse, here comes a statue, once completed, of a Philadelphian, who built one happy empire and thousands of bridges until people called her transcendent.

###



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

South Carolina's Laeticia Amihere displays grief on shoes in SEC Women's Basketball Tournament

Emily Adams, Greenville News
March 3, 2023

Since South Carolina women's basketball's game against LSU on Feb. 12, senior forward Laeticia Amihere has worn bright pink shoes on the court instead of her usual gray pair.

On the side of the white soles, Amihere drew several small ribbons in black marker along with the words "Superwoman" and "Tante Olga."

The LSU matchup was the Gamecocks' Play4Kay game honoring the Kay Yow, the legendary NC State coach who died in 2009 after decades battling breast cancer. The cause hits close to home for Amihere, who lost her aunt and godmother Olga Lambert on Oct. 29. Lambert was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2008, and the cancer recurred four times before her death in 2022.

"She's been my motivation since day 1," Amihere said. "Even last year in the tournament I wore pink shoes with her name on it. She's just been my rock. She motivated to keep playing basketball after my injuries when I had two major knee surgeries (in high school) ... It's just motivation to keep going and that you're able to do it."

In South Carolina's 93-66 rout of Arkansas in the quarterfinals of the 2023 SEC tournament Friday at Bon Secours Wellness Arena, Amihere felt the push from her late godmother. The senior scored a season-high 16 points, shot 100% from the free throw line and logged five rebounds in the victory. Her 16 points tied the second-best performance of her career.

"I don't know how to even explain it, it's just amazing to see her flourish with all she's dealt with," fellow senior Brea Beal said. "For her to come out here on this big stage and produce like that and stay level-headed, it's amazing."

Loss has defined the past several months for Amihere, whose brother Kofi also died suddenly in August. The senior has found relief in basketball, channeling the grief into her game, and coach Dawn Staley has seen the change in Amihere's drive.

"She's focused. She wants it," Staley said. "She's filling the void the right way, meaning she's just extra focused on basketball and being the energy and being the versatile player that we all know she's capable of being."

Amihere still describes Lambert as her biggest supporter and listens to voice messages from her godmother to center herself before every game.

"It just feels like she's here, because she's a woman of God, and so I know she's here in spirit," Amihere said. "... It's started to get real that it's win or go home, and I've taken a lot of this season for granted. Mentally it's hard for me to be in the moment, so I've just been really focusing on being in the moment."

###



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

A confident Kamilla Cardoso shines for USC in SEC opener after award-winning week

Jeremiah Holloway, The State
March 3, 2023

Kamilla Cardoso's South Carolina teammates have consistently encouraged the 6-foot-7 center to assert herself in games.

"You've got to be dominant," they tell her. "You can't go out there being passive. You're under the basket: go up, score. Take those midrange shots."

Cardoso soaked in that advice all season long, and it paid dividends for her. Cardoso was named the SEC's Sixth Woman of the Year on Tuesday, and also earned a nod for All-SEC second-team honors. She scored 14 points and hauled in eight rebounds off the bench in USC's 93-66 win on Friday against Arkansas.

"It's just a quiet 14 (points)," senior guard Olivia Thompson said. "Everything she does, she's just dominant. It's not really loud or flashy. She just gets it done."

Cardoso was the ACC Freshman of the Year in her first college season when she played for Syracuse, averaging 13.6 points and eight rebounds. Dawn Staley recruited Cardoso out of high school and finally landed her in 2021 through the transfer portal.

Upon her arrival, she quickly noticed the increased level of talent on the Gamecocks roster.

"Everybody here is a great player. We have so much depth," Cardoso said. "Everyone from the bench can come in and play."

She played 13.3 minutes per game during last year's national championship run. Since then, coach Dawn Staley and the rest of the team have asked her to contribute even more.

Cardoso listened, worked on her game throughout the offseason and has shown her improvement in practice.

Her increased focus has correlated with an jump in her statistics across the board, earning the recognition from the SEC.

"It feels great," Cardoso said. "I think I was working hard for it and I'm more confident now, and I'm taking better shots. So I think that was one of the reasons that I got it."

Fifth-year senior Victaria Saxton made it a point to help Cardoso in that journey to an increased confidence. She does what she can to give her positive reinforcement for her production.

Saxton believes Cardoso's self-belief directly correlates to her production on both ends of the floor.

"It's always exciting to see all of my teammates get awards," Saxton said. "It just makes me smile, honestly."

Cardoso has turned in seven double-doubles off the bench for South Carolina, and has three games with four blocks or more. When she establishes positioning under the rim, her offensive production becomes difficult to limit.

A standout performance this season included her second-quarter heroics against UConn, where she scored 11 points in that stretch and allowed USC to tie the game at halftime and eventually win by four.

Cardoso's production speaks volumes about the team as a whole, senior guard Brea Beal said. Cardoso's ability to grow as a player is one of the chief reasons the Gamecocks are 30-0 and in position to make another deep postseason run.

"Just being on the inside and seeing the player she's become, and I've only known her for two years," Beal said. "Just to see her fluctuate and finally hit that top spot and be dominant."

The Gamecocks need two more wins to secure the SEC tournament title, and then it's on to the NCAAs.

Cardoso's play should serve as an added lift for South Carolina in those efforts. For now, consistent with the team's goal all year, she's looking toward the next task at hand.

"We just did every little thing that Coach (Staley) asks for," Cardoso said about Friday's game. "I think we all are just very happy with the win, and we're trying to get focused for the next one."

###



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

How mental game turned Brea Beal into two-way weapon for South Carolina women's basketball

Emily Adams, Greenville News
March 4, 2023

South Carolina women's basketball guard Brea Beal started off the 2023 SEC tournament with a bang Friday, hitting back-to-back 3-pointers in the opening minutes of the Gamecocks' quarterfinal game against Arkansas.

After South Carolina (31-0) routed the Razorbacks 93-66, Beal turned around to deliver another electric offensive performance in the semifinals against Ole Miss on Saturday. The senior shot 5-of-7 from the field and 2-of-3 beyond the arc for 13 points, and she also added two assists.

"I've been praying I'd hit the threes, because I felt like I was in a little slump," Beal said. "It just felt amazing ... Especially this time of year, you need that. You need the encouragement from your family, your team, your coaches. I think that's what came out today."

Beal struggled to earn conference and national recognition last season because of her low numbers on the stat sheet: She ended 2022 averaging 5.1 points, five rebounds and 1.3 assists. In 2022-23 Beal has the highest 3-point shooting percentage on the team among players that have attempted more than two shots, hitting 40% from beyond the arc. She averages 6.2 points, 4.1 rebounds, 2.5 assists and a block per game.

While she has long been known as a prolific defender, she was named to the All-SEC defensive team and to the final Naismith Defensive Player of the Year watch list for the first time in her career this season.

It's not her defense that has changed, though: Her increased offensive impact is simply helping to highlight her all-around ability.

"For four years you develop, you grow, you figure out who you are ... and Brea Beal never stops thinking about that or puts herself in a box," Staley said. "Obviously she has been a great defender for us, but throughout the years she is figuring out where she can make an impact passing the ball, where she can make an impact shooting the basketball ... That's the development of her and her mentality and us pushing her towards getting herself ready for the next level."

For Beal, the biggest game-changer has been in her mental game. She said prioritizing her mindset has helped build her confidence as a shooter.

"I've definitely gave into more so the mental health aspect and telling myself that I'm able to make those shots," Beal said. "I just keep telling myself: You're going to make them. You're good. You can shoot ... Because it's my senior season, I don't want to walk away saying I could have done this. It's just that extra aspect to make me realize that I'm here for a reason and on this great team for a reason."

A team-wide emphasis on sharing the ball has also benefited the senior's confidence. The Gamecocks lead the SEC averaging 16.6 assists per game, and that figure has skyrocketed to 26 per game over the first two matchups of the SEC tournament.

"We're able to move the ball, and everybody touches the ball on multiple possessions instead of it staying in one person's hands," Beal said. "When we're playing unselfish basketball ... it just naturally happens. For the people off the bench to come in and make shots and go on runs, it makes us unstoppable."

###



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Winning Coach. Equity Advocate. 'Dream Merchant.'

*Michael Smith, Sports Business Journal
March 6, 2023*

When Dawn Staley was told that a statue of her was going to be erected in downtown Columbia, S.C., she was not happy.

"Oh, she didn't even want it," said Angela O'Neal, one of Staley's best friends and business adviser.

"A statue?" Staley said. "That ain't me."

Staley is the championship-winning women's basketball coach at the University of South Carolina and a former gold-medal player and coach for Team USA. Her Gamecocks are the defending NCAA champions, and they'll likely enter March Madness as the overwhelming favorite to win another title.

If there's a trophy in women's basketball, Staley has probably won it.

But to a sport and a state where she is regarded as so much more, Staley had to be convinced to go along with the plan for a statue of her across from the South Carolina State House.

The Gamecocks coach rarely does anything unless it comes with benefits that extend beyond her. She can do without all of the attention, unless she can put it to good use. That doesn't mean she won't speak up when it's warranted. That has put her in the middle of spats with former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, a 2024 presidential candidate, and Geno Auriemma, UConn's legendary women's basketball coach.

Sometimes, the attention just comes with the territory as perhaps the most visible agent of change in her sport.

The statue (Staley was convinced to go along with it by Columbia Mayor Daniel Rickenmann) will represent more than victories and titles. It will be another tool in Staley's fight for gender equity along the lines of pay and opportunities.

"If it can be used to break glass ceilings and help other women succeed, then I can go along with that," Staley said.

That's why it's actually believable when she says her most recent contract, negotiated at the start of the 2021-22 season, wasn't just about the money. The seven-year, \$22.4 million deal put her on par with the highest-paid coach in the women's game (Auriemma), and provided proof that a female coach could be compensated at the highest levels of college basketball.

"It represents equal pay and because of that, I think it was fair, but it also was groundbreaking," Staley said. "It was more to help other people in my position, not just coaches, but women, Black women, all across the country, that get paid less than their counterparts. I didn't feel like it was self-serving; I just thought it was the right thing to do."

....

Staley does see signs that indicate equity is beginning to establish a foothold in the women's game, an issue that came to greater light during the 2021 NCAA Tournament and was further examined in the Kaplan Report, a study that revealed the inequities between the men's and women's championships.

Most recently, she co-starred with retired Duke men's basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski in an Aflac commercial that's scheduled for release around March Madness. The new spot builds upon the campaign that initially featured two of football's GOATS, Alabama coach Nick Saban and "Coach Prime" Deion Sanders, now the Colorado coach.

"Take gender out of it. Dawn Staley is going to be the biggest star of March Madness," said Garth Knutson, chief marketing officer at Aflac, an NCAA corporate partner.

For Staley to join that company of college sports A-listers speaks to the rise in her popularity and her stature as a voice for women's sports.

In collaboration with Aflac and the Women's Basketball Coaches Association, Staley is also launching "Dawn's List," an attempt to draw attention to three primary issues facing women's sports — resource equity, fan experience and community engagement.

Aflac plans to use its sponsorship activation dollars on the Women's Final Four in Dallas at Tourney Town. Most sponsors in the past have activated only in the city where the men's Final Four was being held. But Aflac was one of 16 NCAA sponsors that used activation dollars at the women's and men's sites in 2022 and will continue to keep putting resources behind the women's game this season.

Staley not only brought attention to fair-pay issues with her new contract, she shed light on smaller, albeit important, equity issues like budgeting, meals, workout gear, apparel and anything else that can be counted or made equitable.

Ray Tanner, who won two national championships as South Carolina's baseball coach before becoming the school's athletic director, said Staley's success has inspired him and lifted the entire department. The success of women's basketball has also prompted Tanner to look at women's sports differently.

"It's not just the winning, it's how she conducts herself every day," Tanner said. "It's had a positive effect on all of our women's programs, and it's a reason we have one of the best women's programs in the country."

The way Staley has constructed the women's basketball program, by developing a culture within the team and a culture within the community, is a model for other programs in the South Carolina athletic department.

"Dawn is a winner, and she's a leader," O'Neal said. "To see her take on issues like gender equity and pay equity, and to lead that change, people have developed a newfound respect for her. They see her in a different light now. She's inspiring."

Staley might be at her best when she's challenged. That's when the fiercest competitor in her comes out. After the Gamecocks upended UConn 81-77 earlier this season, Auriemma complained about the physical play, saying, "It's not basketball." Staley responded with a swift defense of her players.



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In 2018, Staley filed a defamation lawsuit against former Missouri AD Jim Sterk, who blamed Staley for promoting a hostile atmosphere where USC fans spit on Missouri players and called them racial slurs. Sterk eventually settled and apologized. Missouri paid \$50,000 — \$25,000 to Staley's nonprofit, Inner Sole, and \$25,000 to her attorneys.

....

Staley's move from Philadelphia-based Temple University to South Carolina 14 years ago was admittedly a gamble. She had established a nationally recognized program with a track record for winning.

And she was doing it in her beloved hometown. Staley grew up in north Philadelphia, the youngest of five children, learning to play basketball on the playground against boys. In fact, Staley was still playing in the WNBA in 2000 when she was offered and accepted the Temple coaching position.

"Dawn has really evolved into a coach with unmatched credentials," said former Temple AD Bill Bradshaw, who worked with Staley for seven years. "Where I really saw her evolve was as a recruiter because she had an ability to instantly generate trust. She's become, really, an elite coach, and a lot of it has to do with the way people gravitate to her."

In 2008, Staley took over a South Carolina program mired in mediocrity. Turning it around in the Southeastern Conference, generally considered the best league in the land for women's basketball, would be one of her greatest challenges.

There was another factor that drove her south. Her late mother, Estelle, grew up just outside of Columbia, where the university is based, and she still had a lot of family in the area. Being able to relocate her mother there was a gift she never thought she'd be able to provide for her.

The early years of Staley's tenure with the Gamecocks were predictably difficult. Her first three seasons resulted in two losing records and no appearances in the NCAA Tournament. Since then, Staley has steered the South Carolina juggernaut to a pair of national titles and won nearly 80% of her games.

Beyond that, Staley has emerged as the "Dream Merchant," as she refers to herself.

"What drives me is just wanting our players to be successful and them understanding how they navigate through all of that," Staley said. "That's what I love to do — help our players grow and reach their dreams. That's what being a Dream Merchant is all about."

"She's not just a Dream Merchant for her players," O'Neal said. "She's a Dream Merchant for us all."

....

Staley's stature and position of influence was on full display last month when the top-ranked Gamecocks played No. 3 LSU in a battle of undefeated teams on a rainy Super Bowl Sunday in Columbia.

An hour before the game, South Carolina fans filled the Thirsty Fellow Pizzeria and Pub in downtown Columbia and primed for the showdown of national powers.

The game was long-ago sold out and the school's media relations office ran out of media credentials several days before.

A crowd of 18,000 filled Colonial Life Arena, arriving early and staying late throughout a lopsided South Carolina victory. Before the game and after, the Gamecocks players engaged with the fans, making eye contact with the crowd, stopping to speak or wave as they marched on and off the court.

When Staley and her players refer to the fan base, they call them "The Fam."

"It's their way of thanking the fans because it wasn't too long ago that there were several hundred fans in the stands, instead of several thousand," said Larry Thomas, USC's vice president of communications and marketing. "That's just what Dawn instills in her players. You give to them; they give to you. It's like a mutual admiration society between the team and the fans and they respond to that. That's why they have this kind of support across the state."

It was that type of atmosphere that put women's basketball on center stage for a day, as well as several days leading up to the game. ESPN promoted the game heavily on its men's and women's games. When the numbers came back, they showed that an average of 1.5 million viewers had tuned in, making it the highest viewership for a regular-season women's game since 2010. The game also outdrew the top men's game of the day.

"All eyes were on the game because they actually publicized it," Staley said. "They created an anticipation for the game. You drive up the anticipation and voila, you get the numbers. And the numbers speak for themselves."

....

Staley has created not only a culture of winning basketball on the court, but also a culture of awareness and caring in the community. When the Gamecocks play, it's the biggest event in town, the place to see and be seen.

Her presence is so magnetic that the university selected her as the voice-over for its latest marketing video — "The Remarkable We."

"Her words are so powerful," Thomas said. "We've been running those branding spots and we're going to bring them back during March Madness."

Staley's drawing power extends beyond the basketball court. She's a highly desirable speaker and last September she served as the honorary pace car driver at the Cook Out Southern 500 NASCAR race.

"Not only is she one of the biggest names in college sports, her influence and contributions extend way beyond that realm," said Darlington (S.C.) Raceway President Kerry Tharp, previously the communications chief for USC athletics. "Her teams at South Carolina have set the gold standard of excellence, and she has been a terrific ambassador for the university and for the state. We were honored to have her."



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USC's women's games average 13,000 fans, compared to less than 11,000 for men's games. That's how far South Carolina has come from the days when the ticket office ran a "Drive for Five" promotion to get 5,000 fans to a women's basketball game by practically giving tickets away.

Staley over the years has developed a relationship with the Gamecocks' fans, taking advantage of every opportunity to speak to groups and befriend influential figures in the community.

It's not uncommon to find Richland County Sheriff Leon Lott; Judge Jean Toal, the former chief justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court; D.C. Circuit Court Judge J. Michelle Childs; or Rickenmann visiting the women's basketball office on a given day.

Those are the circles in which Staley travels these days.

But that's not surprising, given the profile she has built in Columbia and nationally. A GQ profile of Staley in 2021 described her as the most important Black woman in college basketball because of her position as one of the winningest coaches in the country and an influencer who has developed her voice and learned to express her opinions without regret.

She has both befriended Haley and publicly criticized her when Staley objected to Haley's comments about the WNBA's decision to honor Black Lives Matter.

Staley has not made any public comments about whether she'll support Haley's bid for the presidency. O'Neal said, "Regarding the presidential race, Dawn keeps politics personal and does not publicly support any candidates for any races. Instead, she focuses on the importance of voting." OK, so there's one thing on which Staley won't comment.

But Patti Phillips, the CEO of Women Leaders in College Sports, a leadership group that advocates for the advancement of women in college athletics, says that Staley has "elevated into one of the most impactful women in sports because of her leadership, commitment to equity, and success on and off the court. ... She continues to challenge people to put actions behind their words."

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2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Ball and sing like Zia: Before hoops, Gamecocks' Cooke was known for musical talents

Jeremiah Holloway, The State
March 7, 2023

The South Carolina women's basketball team carries seven seniors on its roster with a combined 900 games of experience.

After their impending departures, a new era of USC basketball will begin — a process that is already underway.

South Carolina's true freshmen — Ashlyn Watkins, Talaysia Cooper and Chloe Kitts — got a taste of postseason action for the first time during the SEC tournament over the weekend as the Gamecocks brought home the conference championship.

Bon Secours Wellness Arena was filled with Gamecock fans and drew in more than 51,000 spectators across a five-day span. But the moment wasn't nerve-racking for the first-year players.

"Coach (Dawn Staley) gets us right, so we're not really freaking out or anything," Kitts said. "No one is."

Kitts joined the team during the season after graduating from high school early. She's appeared in 14 games.

There have been difficulties in making the adjustment from high school to college, she said, but constant communication with Staley has helped. She's spent this season focusing on ways to improve her game for next year.

"I still need to get bigger, stronger, better," Kitts said.

Cooper, from Turbeville, has caught the attention of Staley by her willingness to constantly ask questions. She said she embraced her first minutes of collegiate postseason basketball during the conference tournament.

She's been used as both a point guard and shooting guard for the Gamecocks.

South Carolina's experienced players have stressed to Cooper to pay attention to small details.

"You have to do what you have to do on and off the court, because it's gonna show on the court," Cooper said.

Three of USC's seniors — Aliyah Boston, Zia Cooke and Brea Beal — started as freshmen. They won the SEC championship but were unable to compete in the NCAA tournament due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Six of the seven seniors on this year's roster were on the team for the 2021 Final Four season and last year's national championship team.

South Carolina's veterans have already communicated the importance of the postseason to its younger players.

"Tournament time, SEC and NCAA, is much more intense," Watkins said. "It matters more. Just have to be ready for any and everything. Playing back-to-back, it's not like the regular season.

Watkins, who is from Columbia and attended Cardinal Newman, has played the most of the true freshmen, with 28 games and 11.3 minutes per game. She's recorded two double-doubles this season and made the first dunk in program history.

"I'm learning a lot of different things," Watkins said. "I'm learning to just sit and wait for my turn. But it's good because I'm learning from experienced players."

South Carolina will bring in Milaysia Fulwiley, Sanyah Jah and Tessa Johnson next season in its freshman class.

Kitts was originally a member of that class before joining the team early, so she'll come into next year with a season under her belt. She said she looks forward to joining next year's group with the knowledge that the seniors have given her thus far.

"I feel like I'm taking in a lot, because there's a lot of leaders around me," Kitts said. "They're all pretty good leaders and they're all leaving. I know I'm not gonna be a freshman next year. ... So I know I have to lead."

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2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Ball and sing like Zia: Before hoops, Gamecocks' Cooke was known for musical talents

Jeremiah Holloway, The State
March 10, 2023

A middle school-aged Zia Cooke stood before close friends and family to send her older brother off to college with a song.

She performed "Mama I Made It" by August Alsina, using her voice to touch the hearts of those in the room.

"It's giving me chills now," her father, Stratman Cooke III, said. "She had the whole place in tears. People couldn't even keep it together."

Cooke was born to be a basketball player, but those who knew her growing up didn't see it at first.

She won talent show after talent show with her ability to sing and dance. She sang in front of church on special occasions. She even won a little league football championship with the Mid-City Colts and got her jersey number retired before pivoting to basketball.

Cooke tapped into her singing talent last year by releasing a song through a name, image and likeness partnership with Vault, an NFT platform. The song — fitting for a member of a national championship team — was called "Winning."

"I definitely do want to get to the point that music is something that is a part of me," Cooke said. "But the schedule that I have, the things that are going on, it's hard to make that happen. Definitely going to keep doing it."

Cooke's range of talents transcends basketball, and those extracurriculars away from the court have helped her on the hardwood. Today, she's a senior leader for the No. 1 South Carolina Gamecocks.

From talent shows in Toledo to sold-out crowds in Colonial Life Arena, Cooke has spent her whole life performing under the spotlight.

ZIA WAS NEVER GONNA BE A BASKETBALL PLAYER'

To honor his father who passed away, Cooke III placed both of his kids in many different programs to explore different avenues of life. His father did the same for him when he was young.

"He kept me in singing, dancing, instruments," Cooke III said. "He was a very cultural person. Opera, anything you could think of, this man had me in."

Cooke III placed his daughter in classes at the Toledo Repertoire Theatre, where she learned how to act and perform in front of audiences.

Zia Cooke, 9 years old at the time, quickly picked up on her lines. She was moved up to the master class to act with high-schoolers once the teachers saw her progression.

"Zia was never gonna be a basketball player," Cooke III said. "We were thinking she was going to be an entertainer."

Coupled with her acting ability, Zia Cooke was a talented singer and dancer, often imitating the styles of Michael Jackson, Chris Brown and Aaliyah.

Cooke's talents allowed her to travel. By winning talent shows in Toledo, she was invited to a competition in Detroit, where she won third place as a performer.

"She had the unique ability to be able to sing and dance at the same time," Cooke III said.

She sang in church on special occasions as well, giving her the experience of performing in front of crowds.

Her brother, Stratman Cooke IV, remembers her power performance at his high school graduation party.

"I was crying," Cooke IV said. "She never really sang for me like she did that night."

"When she did that, people wanted Zia to do that for them," Cooke III added. "She would be so scared to do it and so nervous, but she started doing it."

Cooke carried her entertainment background into college and exercised it when she could. She arrived in Columbia as a freshman in 2019 as a part of the USC women's basketball program's top-ranked recruiting class. She was the No. 4 ranked player nationally by ESPN.

After the COVID-19 outbreak ended South Carolina's 32-1 season, she began working on music, taking influence from Rod Wave, Summer Walker, Coi Leray and Lil Durk.

"I was just in my room, I was listening to beats and I just was able to make music," Cooke said. "I made like five songs in like, one week. And then after that, I was able to do it. I think it just came from me being able to experience things and I was able to just write it out."

Cooke IV also took an interest in music as a college student, working with his sister on a few tracks.

They never released any songs officially, but they'd go to the studio whenever he came down to South Carolina.

"While I'm in the studio, she'll call me while she's in the studio and be like, 'I just made this song,'" Cooke IV said. "She'll always be like, 'Hey, what should I do better, what should I do with this, what ad-lib should I add to this?'"

Zia Cooke released "Winning" last year, and occasionally puts out TikTok videos with clips of her singing. She said she enjoys making music as a pastime when she isn't preoccupied with her duties for the No. 1 Gamecocks.

"I rarely get bored because there's always something to do," Cooke said. "But any time I'm bored, I might go write a song or go record some music."



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Cooke's talents as an actress, dancer and singer not only gave her a variety of skills, but made her a walking spectacle in her family at an early age.

On occasion at USC, she's able to re-create the joys of her performance days.

"She brings a lot of light to the family," Cooke IV said. "She's the one that brings all the joy and laughter."

'BALL LIKE ZIA'

Cooke wasn't always thinking about basketball. But her older brother often worked on his game and had his sister tag along.

"She never really liked sports at all," Cooke IV said. "She liked to wear dresses and stuff and I kinda forced her to be my brother. When I didn't have anyone to train myself, I would make her do those things."

Cooke continued to train with her brother and eventually took an interest in basketball while practicing with him at the YMCA.

Cooke later attained local stardom at Rogers High School in Toledo. She attracted sold-out crowds, turned in high-scoring games, earned appearances on mixtape videos all over YouTube and caught the eye of Gamecocks coach Dawn Staley. T

he way Cooke represented Toledo inspired a young rapper in the area, Ta'Keyrah Hughes, who goes by the stage name YK Yung Keyrah, to write a song in her honor called "Ball Like Zia."

Hughes is now a senior in high school at Start High School.

She said she and Cooke know each other and say hello when Cooke is in the city. Hughes described Cooke as an inspiration, and a reason she continues to pursue rap

"Down here in Toledo, we know Zia, she's balling," Hughes said. "She got her 1,000-point ball. She's big, she's getting street names changed. She's just doing her thing. And to be a girl in Toledo, there's not really many people that get recognized for their good doings."

Cooke's basketball abilities sometimes served as a unifying experience in the community.

Many people in Toledo know each other, Hughes said, so everyone gravitated toward Rogers High's biggest games to watch Cooke play.

"People might talk a little trash talk, but there weren't arguments or anything," Hughes said. "It was just vibes. She's showing out for us."

'THAT'S HER MASTER POWER'

Cooke carried both her basketball talents and love for music to Columbia.

When it's time to work, Cooke approaches training with the Gamecocks the same way she's always approached it.

"She can sing, but she barely sings around us," Staley told The State. "She's more quiet than probably the other players. Not in a bad way, she just gets out of the way. She doesn't want any parts of it.

"She's calm and cool."

Staley likes Cooke's music and also harps on her talents as a player. Her ability to stay locked in is a big reason South Carolina's had the success that it's had.

Cooke's dancing ability helped give her strong footwork as a guard. Her brother placed an emphasis on footwork in their workouts growing up to hone in on that.

Skating also helped, as the two went to the Ohio Skate roller rink in Toledo every week.

"That's her master power, is in those feet," their father said. "Zia's feet are like none other, man. She can move those feet."

Cooke has been part of two Final Fours and one national championship at USC. She's eligible for the WNBA Draft after the season.

She leads South Carolina in scoring and is shooting a career-high in field-goal percentage while handling some of the point guard responsibilities for the Gamecocks.

"I think every game, she steps on the floor with that mindset of just dominating, and I think she's killing it every single time," teammate Aliyah Boston said after a win against Arkansas.

Cooke now travels the country to perform in front of big crowds and showcase her talents for the world to see, just like her family believed she would.

Though not in the way they once envisioned.

"We never thought she'd played basketball," Cooke III said. "Never. If someone would have told me this, I would have lost everything I had, because I never would have imagined."



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Dawn Staley's No. 1 Gamecocks ride another nasty defense into NCAA Tournament

*David Cloninger, Charleston Post & Courier
March 11, 2023*

COLUMBIA — The details get lost.

Everybody can read the rankings and the 32-0 record and know South Carolina is a great team. They can look up the myriad awards granted to Aliyah Boston, Zia Cooke, Brea Beal and coach Dawn Staley.

But why are they so good, exactly? The Gamecocks have great scorers, but hardly ever lean on one individual to do the cooking.

It's because they count on everybody on their roster to turn off the opponent's stove, something at which they've proven to be deadly efficient.

"We make a concerted effort to defend. We don't like when people score on us," Staley said after a pummeling of Vanderbilt in January. "We take it really personal, and we're made up that way."

The top-ranked Gamecocks head into the NCAA Tournament with the country's No. 4 scoring defense, allowing 51.1 points per game. Opponents are only making 31.4 percent of their shots against USC, which is challenging the national record of 30 percent, set by Connecticut in 2010.

It's a repeat of last year, when the Gamecocks allowed 50.7 points per game (third in the country) and decreased it to 45.5 in their six NCAA Tournament games, the second-best showing the tournament has ever had. Some players left the team, but that focus remains.

"I feel like every game is the mentality you want to have," said Laeticia Amihere, after a marvelous SEC Tournament game against Ole Miss, "and we wanted to make sure we took care of business today."

The Rebels took the Gamecocks to overtime in the regular season, USC triumphing while realizing Superman's cape had been tugged. Ole Miss guard Angel Baker scored 17 points, above her 15-ppg average, and in the tournament, Baker was coming off a 23-point showing the day before.

Amihere switched on and off Baker, confounding her throughout. She scored nine points.

"I can guard Angel' ... she didn't say this, per se, she just said it with her actions out there on the floor," Staley said, after Amihere didn't play much in the OT game in Oxford. "LA's played point guard for us, so she was point forward for us today."

That came a day after the Gamecocks hammered Arkansas, when the Razorbacks' Chrissy Carr had ripped Missouri for 34 points the day before. With Victaria Saxton on her, Carr had four against USC.

"I know she has been shooting the ball really well late in the season, so I knew I had to stay close on defense," Saxton said.

And those examples are just to point out what USC can do without known defensive specialist Beal, and shot-blockers supreme Boston and Kamilla Cardoso. They're all large reasons why USC leads the country in blocks per game (nine, which would break USC's national record of 8.6, set in 2020) and rebounding margin (20.5, which would break Baylor's national record of 20.7, set in 2017).

Beal spearheaded an attack during the Final Four last year that held Louisville volume scorer Hailey Van Lith to nine points, and UConn's Paige Bueckers, the 2021 national player of the year, to 14 while playing in her hometown.

The defense carried over to this year, to the point of being so dominant that Staley fired back at UConn coach Geno Auriemma, who complained about what "teams" do to his players immediately after again losing to the Gamecocks.

"Do we play physical? Absolutely. We play physical. Do we do it the right way? Absolutely," Staley said. "So for us, we're going to continue to do it that way. If you really don't like how we play, then you have to adapt. We've done it plenty of times."

Tennessee was a handful in the SEC Tournament championship game, Jordan Horston and Rickea Jackson giving the Gamecocks fits. But USC settled down, holding Horston to five points after halftime (14 in the first), although Jackson scored 17 with 10 in the second half.

Staley shrugged.

It's pick your poison with those two, much like it is when opponents try to pick which USC player to guard.

"I mean, it was a hard matchup with Horston and Jackson," she said. "I think over the course of 40 minutes and the amount of people that we were able to throw at them, they weren't as sharp as they were throughout the entire game. That's just a product of our depth."

The Gamecocks will face a variety of scorers and scoring in the NCAA Tournament, some that it could have already faced before. That would be familiar, although of course those coaches would adjust from the last time, just as USC would.

Yet the number of individuals the Gamecocks can point to, the way they've raised hackles and sunk teeth into opponents the past two years, winning all but two games in that span and taking the last 38 straight ...

It's the football axiom. Offense sells tickets. Defense wins championships.

The Gamecocks did both last year, and plan to do both again.

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2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

Raven Johnson, Kamilla Cardoso making their AAU connection work for South Carolina

Jeremiah Holloway, The State
March 13, 2023

Raven Johnson has tallied 106 assists for South Carolina this season. From that number, 29 — more than a quarter of those assists — have gone to Kamilla Cardoso.

Johnson is the shortest player on USC's roster at 5-foot-8. Cardoso stands the tallest at 6-foot-7. But it's not just Cardoso's height that makes her an easy target for Johnson. It's their familiarity with each other's playing styles.

"When Kamilla's on the court, that's my first look," Johnson said.

Johnson and Cardoso's bond dates back to their high school years. The two were AAU teammates for FBC Hunt in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Johnson was a class below Cardoso, but coach Keisha Hunt convinced the program director to let Johnson play in the older division. Hunt saw promise in Johnson as an eighth-grader, which resulted in her playing with high school seniors as a sophomore.

Cardoso and Johnson played on the same team for two years, winning tournament after tournament. Their highest achievement together was winning the inaugural girls Under Armour league in 2019.

"I don't remember our wins because you play a lot in travel ball," Hunt said about the team's record with the USC duo. "I know it was a lot of wins to one loss."

Hunt described Cardoso as a high-IQ player in AAU, with the ability to pass the ball well. She also had the speed to get up and down the court.

Johnson, Hunt said, has always used active hands on defense and pushes the pace, just like she does at South Carolina. Johnson was a player who showed strong decision-making skills and managed to get the ball to everyone on the court.

"She is the epitome of having a coach on the floor," Hunt said.

This season is the first time the two have shared the court for a long period of time since high school. Cardoso went to Syracuse for her freshman year before transferring to USC. The next year, Johnson suffered a knee injury two games into the season. T

he two picked up where they left off this season. Cardoso leads the bench unit in scoring, and Johnson, who also comes off the bench, leads the team as a whole in assists.

"Since the first time I played with her, we had a great chemistry," Cardoso said. "We still have it now. I love playing with my girl. She's always gonna find me, and I'm gonna find her."

Hunt has seen growth in both players' games, but especially Cardoso.

Cardoso lived with Hunt after coming to the United State from Brazil. She initially kept a more reserved personality, which translated on the court. But she eventually grew past that and became a more assertive player who finishes around the rim better than she did in high school.

"Now, to see her finally being confident enough in herself to not play reserved and just to let loose and play," Hunt said. "That's what I've seen in her in college."

South Carolina's bench unit has been dubbed "the energizers," with Johnson and Cardoso leading the charge.

Johnson made the SEC's All-Freshman team, and Cardoso was named the Sixth Woman of the Year while also getting the nod for All-SEC second team.

"We push each other," Johnson said. "When we get in, let's bring the energy. Let's bring that fire power. So me and Kamilla, we feed off each other. I definitely feed off her. She's my bail out, pretty much. If I don't see anything, I'm hoping to get it to her."

USC coach Dawn Staley in November said the coaching staff is intentional about playing the two at the same time. She believes Cardoso can be a dominant player, and Johnson helps maximize her strengths.

"Raven forces Kamilla to do some things that she just doesn't do naturally playing with anybody else," Staley said. "She passes the ball to her high. She passes the ball up the floor in transition and makes her go catch, and makes her go score."

Johnson and Cardoso's bond extends off the court.

The two are roommates and see each other practically every day. The constant encouragement they give to each other comes as a byproduct of the time they spend together.

"We eat together, we go shoot together, we talk together — everything," Johnson said.

Hunt commends Cardoso and Johnson for their progress as players, but also their character off the court. She said she hasn't missed a game since the two reunited.

Although she has coached talented players in the past, few teams have clicked like her AAU squad with Johnson and Cardoso.

"It is such a pleasure to watch the games and see them as teammates," Hunt said. "As soon as I knew that they were about to be reunited in college, I knew it was gonna be something special."



2022-23 SOUTH CAROLINA ATHLETICS - PRESS CLIPS

The hidden moments that reveal Aliyah Boston's greatness

Tonya Simpson, ESPN.com
March 15, 2023

HANDS, FINGERS, ELBOWS and hips jab at Aliyah Boston as she catches the ball on the baseline inside South Carolina's Colonial Life Arena. Surrounded by three LSU players, Boston pinballs against them as she tries to find something resembling breathing room, let alone a path to the rim. It's a tangle of limbs with a frenetic edge, a desperation to get the ball away from the reigning national player of the year. She spins to her left, shoots with her right, makes the bucket and heads to the free throw line.

It is a familiar scene during Boston's last season at South Carolina: She draws a crowd, both in the stands and in the paint. And she does so without being flashy. She doesn't lick her fingers like LSU's Angel Reese, doesn't chuck it from the logo like Iowa's Caitlin Clark. Sure, she sports her brightly colored and ever-changing braids, but that is the extent of the attention she draws for anything other than her talent and production.

She doesn't celebrate big plays ostentatiously, if at all. After a fourth-quarter block against LSU that was so hard it left Alexis Morris on the ground, Boston doesn't smile or indulge in even a moment of schadenfreude. Instead, she helps Morris up, receives a pat on the back from her and goes right back to the huddle.

Boston isn't the biggest, the fastest, nor the loudest. But it's clear that every opponent has a singular defensive mission: Stop her.

Collectively, her talent and humility are proof that greatness doesn't take a singular form -- that Boston has earned a place in the canon of college basketball while embracing the duality of fierceness in competition and gentleness outside of it. She has walked humbly through four years in Dawn Staley's program with a trail of broken records and disheartened opponents in her wake.

Her senior-year stat line, though still impressive, reflects the relentless efforts of defenses trying to pin down her wings. They have been only marginally successful. She remains in the conversation for national player of the year, a designation she's already earned once before in addition to being a two-time unanimous first-team All-American and the reigning defensive player of the year. She was the first freshman to record a triple-double in South Carolina school history and now holds the program's record for triple-doubles and the SEC record for consecutive double-doubles. She has scored 1,886 points (and counting) and grabbed 1,439 rebounds (and counting). She has led South Carolina to the No. 1 overall seed in the NCAA tournament and a first-round game against Norfolk State on Friday.

Over four games, three hair colors and two sellouts, alongside fans, teammates, opponents and program legends, we sought to answer one question: What defines Aliyah Boston's greatness?

BOSTON ENTERS THE Jan. 22 game vs. Arkansas tied with Gamecocks legend Sheila Foster for the program record for career double-doubles. It's a record that has stood for over 40 years, poised to join the long list of records that now begin with Boston. There is no doubt she will surpass Foster; it's only a matter of whether today will be the day.

Two hours before tipoff, the arena is empty save for some AV folks setting up, staff climbing a ladder with glass cleaner for the backboards and athletic trainers laying towels over the team's bench seats. There's no music, no hype, just the quiet goings-on of details and logistics.

Boston comes on the court, unnoticed at first, and casually shoots around. She's the first player here, and somewhere someone starts the music. Gamecocks guard Kierra Fletcher joins her, Lil Baby booming through the arena speakers. The seats are still empty, but they've turned the burner on the energy.

Boston's mom, Cleone, and grandmother flew to South Carolina from their home in St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands to see the game. It's rainy and cold in Columbia, and Boston jokes that they most likely didn't pack for the weather.

"This is where I lose hoodies, because I'm going to give them one now and then tomorrow they need another one, and then they're going to leave with four hoodies," she says, laughing.

Boston has said she doesn't really get nervous before games anymore, but the same cannot be said for her mother, who jokes that if she gets up during the game, it's because she just can't bear to watch and needs to walk around the concourse.

"My stomach is in knots," Cleone tells her own mother just before tipoff.

Aliyah's family is sitting a few rows up from Foster's usual seat when they realize that today could be the day the record is broken. Tears well up in Cleone's eyes, catching the stadium lights. She thinks back to when they put Aliyah and her older sister, Alexis, on a plane to live with their aunt in Massachusetts and attend basketball camp when Aliyah was 12. Alexis took the community college route before serving as manager for the Gamecocks while studying at South Carolina. It was impossible then for Cleone and Aliyah's father, Al, to imagine that the difficult decision of sending their girls to the United States would be the first brick on a path to future No. 1 WNBA draft pick.

"People may not believe it, but for us, it was just about finding a way to pay for college for our children. We had no ideas or thoughts of them being exceptional athletes or anything," Cleone says. "Her dad and I weren't going to be in that position to just have money sitting there to do that, but we wanted them to have their education. So that was the goal, originally. Everything else is extra. Extra blessings from God."

With just over six minutes left in the third quarter, Boston, again swarmed in the paint, has two offensive rebounds on one possession, pushing her over the threshold to her 73rd double-double. The sequence ends with Boston getting a run-of-the-mill bucket on a layup, and the crowd cheers at a level one would expect for a play that put the Gamecocks up 62-26. That is, except for Cleone and the rest of Boston's family, who have shot out of their seats, crying and hugging one another.

Fans in the surrounding seats look over, perhaps a bit confused by the commotion, until the announcement is made during the next timeout. The camera cuts to Foster and then to Boston, both waving humbly to the crowd.

"It's all good, because records are made to be broken," Foster says through tears. "I'm happy for her."

South Carolina is up 43 at the end of the third quarter, but no one is leaving early and the Gamecocks show no sign of letting up. The stands are still packed with fans cheering for every basket and foul as if it were a tie score.



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“This is going to come out wrong, but when you’re up by a lot, you don’t want to ever continue to give teams hope, in the nicest way possible,” Boston says, careful not to be unkind. “You just continue to put your foot on the gas, and that’s what Coach Staley wants because there’s going to be closer games where you can’t mess up.”

If the Gamecocks don’t let up when leading by 20, 30, 40, neither do defenses let up on Boston. Staley recognizes the complicated and often undue emphasis the stat lines get when, in reality, it is an incomplete representation of a player’s impact.

“For Aliyah, we ask her to do so much more than score and rebound. We ask her to defend, we ask her to be the energy our team needs at times, we ask her to talk in the huddles,” Staley says. “A lot comes with Aliyah and her performances. I know outwardly we see the double-doubles, but inwardly we see all of the contributions she brings to our team.”

Breaking a 40-plus year record, however, is a tangible and inarguable measure of her greatness. After the game, Foster stands among the throng of kids and teens waiting for Boston to make her way toward the tunnel. Foster takes a photo with Boston, just like the fans, and congratulates her. A few rows up, the Boston family chats amongst themselves, but Cleone stands quietly watching Aliyah take photos and sign autographs, her eyes welling with pride and awe.

AFTER EVERY GAME in Colonial Life Arena, there is a surge of fans around the court, straining on tiptoes with their phones at the ready, hoping for a selfie or an autograph from Boston and her teammates.

Voices of every age and pitch are heard from every direction yelling, “Aliyah! Aliyah!” as she makes her way around the court and toward the tunnel.

“[The kids] can, after the game, interact and take pictures and get signatures, and it means everything to them,” says Lauren Brannon, a season-ticket holder who is attending the February Georgia game with her husband, Rob, and two daughters, ages 9 and 7. “We get to see them and cheer for them in a different way as a parent because Aliyah and the team all come around and make them feel part of it too.”

The girls debate their favorite of Aliyah’s four hair colors so far this season -- one votes for teal and the other says pink. Rob and Lauren call Aliyah what many parents and youth coaches call her: a role model. It’s a designation that certainly goes beyond mere performance on the court and undoubtedly includes the humility that seems to come so naturally to Boston.

As she poses for selfies, arm extended, smile wide, you see the approachability and relatability that makes parents recognize her as such. They’re qualities that can’t be taught or faked and elevate a player from good to unforgettable.

“It’s really special to walk across after a game and just see all of them lined up,” Boston says. “I want them to feel like, ‘I see you, like you’re included in this.’ ... Their support means everything.”

After the Georgia game, players from the Hopkins Middle School Lady Eagles basketball team hurry from their seats on the upper rim to the court to see Boston up close. The girls stand, shoulders overlapping, leaning forward for the first glimpse of Boston as she makes her way toward where they stand.

“I think right now everybody is just kind of starstruck,” head coach Marissa Timmons says.

When Staley first came to South Carolina, fans were dotted sparsely across Colonial Life Arena. The average attendance in 2007-08, the season before Staley arrived, was just over 1,800 fans per game. Now, the Gamecocks lead the nation in attendance, often reaching 10 times the 2007-08 average.

“You could really sit anywhere you wanted. We came to see what [Coach Staley] could do, because she was a big name and we were hoping she could build something here that everybody would be really proud of,” says Jenny Redmond, a season-ticket holder since 2008. “It worked out pretty damn good.”

Redmond and her family are quick to recognize what is fundamental to Boston’s style of play: a selflessness that is intrinsic and without regard to her personal stat line.

“[Boston] is amazing, but I’m always amazed at all of them. It is such a selfless team. It’s not about personal accolades, it’s about what everybody needs to do so the team can win. And it makes for some really beautiful basketball,” Redmond says.

Indeed, fellow “freshie” Zia Cooke leads the undefeated Gamecocks in scoring this season, averaging 15.3 points per game compared to Boston’s 13.3. Boston, the national player of the year in 2021-22, has spent this season swarmed by defenses, including quadruple-teams against Georgia, as squads try to slow the force that led South Carolina to a national title last April. Still, she’s shooting 57% from the field and averaging 9.7 rebounds per game.

In charge of keeping the fans under control are Ian Smith and Robbie Hunter, part of the security team at Colonial Life Arena. They’re always posted at the same spot, right near the visitor’s bench at the mouth of the tunnel, and bear witness to the crowds and moments not shown on the stadium cameras.

“[Boston] is a genuine person, and she’s very accommodating,” Smith says. “She comes to men’s games a lot of times, and Ken and I are standing here, and somebody wants their picture made, she never says no. If they want an autograph, she never says no.”

Adds Hunter: “And she doesn’t have to. She’s a star. You’ll see during the game, she’ll call them in the huddle, you’ll hear her talking. They follow her lead.”

When the men’s team hosts Auburn in late January, Boston sits with her mom near the corner of the court, wearing a bright orange hoodie. Her famous, ever-changing braids are the deep teal of the Caribbean. Together, it means she is accidentally sporting Auburn colors. Forgiven, no questions asked: Fans in the concourse stop her to ask for photos.

BOSTON WILL GRADUATE from South Carolina with a degree in mass communications and a list of records and accolades longer than a CVS receipt. There will be a vacated spotlight at forward that Sania Feagin hopes to be the one to fill, but emulating Boston’s greatness might be a task too tall.

“I think the beauty of Aliyah is her entire body of work,” Staley says after the LSU win. “There’s no one like her who produces on both sides of the basketball. Nobody.”

When Boston had her highlight-reel block against LSU and didn’t celebrate, the camera cut to Feagin standing up from the bench, dancing and cheering alongside Fletcher -- not letting a play like that go by without paying it some respect.

From dancing around with Feagin to “Baby Got Back” on TikTok to explaining plays in practice, Boston is a friend and mentor to her younger teammates, hoping to set them



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up for continued success in her (outsized) absence.

“She’s bettering me to become a better person, a better athlete, period,” Feagin says of Boston. “It’s going to take a lot of younger players to be leaders. ... I feel like the baton’s going to pass down to me.”

A continual roster of exceptional talent is part of what Staley has built at South Carolina, where Boston succeeded A’ja Wilson as the leader of the program. Wilson, who was the No. 1 draft pick in 2018 and is now a two-time WNBA MVP with the reigning champion Las Vegas Aces, has a statue casting her in an eternal mid-shot pose in front of Colonial Life Arena.

The 6-foot-5 Boston also already has a legacy worthy of bronzing at only 21 years old. Arkansas coach Mike Neighbors agrees, joking in a news conference whether there is enough room in front of the stadium for another statue to be erected next to Wilson’s.

“I don’t think [Boston] gets enough credit for her basketball IQ,” Neighbors says. “I think too many people just say she’s tall and she’s talented. They don’t understand how hard it is; she gets fouled literally every time she shoots it.”

Wilson recognizes Boston’s greatness in a mutual respect as Gamecocks, and a soon-to-be rival in the WNBA. The Indiana Fever have the No. 1 pick in next month’s draft, so it is likely Boston will join former South Carolina teammate Destanni Henderson in Indianapolis, and, on June 4, host Wilson and the Aces.

“I just want her to be her,” Wilson says. “I want her to be happy and established in our league. Hopefully, she gets a rookie of the year underneath her. I don’t want to say championship because I’m going to be competing against her, so leave it up to me. I’ll make sure that she does not have a championship.”

ALIYAH BOSTON IS CRYING in the tunnel. It’s senior night, her last regular-season game at Colonial Life Arena, and hers is the last name to be announced in the pregame ceremony. As she walks out with her parents, sister and aunt toward the framed No. 4 jersey spotlit at center court, the sound of the crowd swells and rolls down from the last rows of the upper deck like a fog.

Boston wipes her tears before a long embrace with Staley and looks up and around to the bowl of fans still hollering their lungs out for her. It’s a recognition of her 130 games played, the hard-fought baskets and the easy wins. It is, as it has been all season, 360 degrees of respect and adoration for a player whose name is already indelible in the history of the sport.

She doesn’t know it at senior night, but in only a week, she’ll be cutting down her piece of the net as the Gamecocks take home an SEC championship with their 38th consecutive win, a title that eluded them a year ago. Boston’s braids will still be pink and white, let down to make room for the commemorative championship hat, as she turns back toward the camera, holds up the net and smiles wide.

“We want to win a national championship. That’s what we want to do, and we’re going to do it,” she says.

It’s a lasting image for a legend of the sport, one that only raising a second NCAA trophy could supersede.

“I grew up here. This was the time where I really grew up and just grew into who I am. And I’m just thankful,” she says. “God has opened miraculous doors. I’ve been here for four years, healthy and safe.

“But everything has to come to an end at some point.”

Back in Colonial Life Arena on senior night, it isn’t yet the end. It’s one last regular-season game in front of the faithful crowd that watched her go from bud to blossom. The stadium lights come up; she wipes her eyes. It’s game time.

###



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South Carolina's Shane Beamer: Dawn Staley's success proof 'you can accomplish everything we want to accomplish'

Ivan Maisel, on3.com
March 15, 2023

If you want to be reminded of the power of hiring the right coach, look at South Carolina. When Dawn Staley took over Gamecocks women's basketball in 2008, it was just another program. South Carolina had been to the NCAA tournament twice in the preceding 17 seasons.

Here it is, 2023, and Staley's Gamecocks are favored to win their second consecutive NCAA championship and third in the past seven seasons. They are 32-0 this season, 27 of those wins by at least 10 points, and take a 38-game winning streak into their NCAA first-round game Friday against Norfolk State (26-6).

"She has taken a women's basketball program that nobody even thought about, and they are the premier program in all of women's college basketball," South Carolina football coach Shane Beamer said. "Nobody thought that could be done here and she's done it."

The lesson to Beamer, who began his third spring practice in Columbia on Tuesday, is obvious. Staley has proven that South Carolina is a campus where "you can accomplish everything we want to accomplish."

Beamer almost surely would consider this damning by faint praise, but he has taken only two seasons to make Gamecocks football relevant again. Relevance isn't his goal. But it's a milestone, if only because it seems to be a force of habit to underestimate his program.

In 2021, South Carolina was picked to finish sixth in the SEC East in the league's preseason poll; the Gamecocks finished tied for fourth (7-6 overall, 3-5 in the league). Last fall, the Gamecocks were picked to finish fifth; they were third (8-5, 4-4), including a 63-38 rout of No. 5 Tennessee and a 31-30 victory at archrival No. 7 Clemson that broke the Tigers' seven-game winning streak in the rivalry.

South Carolina brings back veteran quarterback Spencer Rattler and All-SEC wide receiver Antwane Wells Jr., but now comes the hard part. To win an SEC East championship, South Carolina must overtake Georgia, winner of the past two national championships. Beamer, 45, grew up around success. His father Frank won 238 games and seven conference championships at Virginia Tech. But having Staley on campus has given Beamer a literal front-row seat to observe the best coach in her sport.

"Every single week, every single game, they get their opponent's best shot and they keep withstanding it," Beamer said. "This year's team, I see how unselfish they are, how they pull and care for one another."

You couldn't grow up in Blacksburg (or anywhere in the state) in the early '90s and not be aware of Staley's basketball prowess. She played point guard and led Virginia to three consecutive Final Fours (1990-92). She played on three Olympic gold-medal teams. She took the head-coaching job at Temple in her native Philadelphia in 2000 during her professional playing career and continued to play well enough to make the WNBA All-Decade Team in 2006.

She's pretty much a unicorn, and Beamer's pretty much not dumb. You can measure the unscripted time on a college football coach's schedule with a stopwatch, but in each season, Beamer has carved out time to catch at least one of Staley's practices. Last month, he sat in on practice the day before the Gamecocks played then-unbeaten and third-ranked No. 3 LSU (23-0).

Beamer observed as the team watched video. He watched practice from a courtside seat. Beamer wanted to know how Staley organized her practice. To hear him tell it, coaching football and women's basketball isn't apples and oranges. It's more like Honeycrisps and Galas.

"How you present information to the players and how you teach things (they) can take from it," Beamer said. "At the end of practice, Dawn threw in something new. I think it was something like, 'We really haven't run this set offensively, but I just wanted to introduce it to you. We're going to need it tomorrow or at some point. As the season goes, we're going to need this.' That stood out to me. Whether that was true or not, she kept it fresh with her players. Late in the season, she was able to do something like that."

The No. 1 Gamecocks easily defeated the No. 3 Tigers 88-64 before a crowd of 18,000 at Colonial Life Arena. South Carolina has become the hottest ticket in women's hoops. Beamer has gotten calls from NFL stars Stephon Gilmore and Deebo Samuel, former Gamecocks looking for tickets to see Aliyah Boston & Co. do what they do.

Beamer's relationship with Staley is a two-way street. At the home loss to Georgia last fall, Beamer caught grief for yelling at South Carolina women athletes to get off the field. They had been brought onto the playing field between quarters as part of a Title IX celebration, an event Beamer professed to know nothing about (in his defense, football coaches live in caves during the season).

Two days later, Staley tweeted, "Hey, @CoachSBeamer, sorry I've been under a rock the last few days but we know you have done nothing but support our programs since the day you became @GamecockFB head coach! All hands on deck to get a win on Saturday!"

At 7:10 a.m. EDT Tuesday, Beamer tweeted a video of Williams-Brice Stadium at dawn to proclaim his excitement at the arrival of spring football. It may be his favorite day of the year. Coaches love spring practice because they can focus on teaching and development rather than the stress of winning a game on Saturday.

As luck would have it, Beamer didn't schedule a practice on Friday at 2 p.m., when the top-ranked South Carolina women play for their 39th consecutive victory.

Expect ESPN to deliver a shot of Beamer in the stands. He'll be rooting, of course, but maybe he'll pick up something he can use, too.

###



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You Can Triple-Team Aliyah Boston—But You Can't Shut Down Her Brain

Michael Rosenberg, *Sports Illustrated*
Marc 17, 2023

It's winter on the mainland, and Aliyah Boston—reigning National Player of the Year and pride of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands—is sitting in South Carolina's practice facility, explaining how to get a taste of the Caribbean. What matters here is not her chosen restaurant (Reggae Grill, a Jamaican place just outside Columbia) or her standing order (curry chicken with a side of mac and cheese), but the way she gives directions:

"You're gonna see a stoplight. You're gonna drive over the bridge," she says. "There's going to be a gas station—it might be a Shell—to the right. There is gonna be a big Cayce sign to the left. Make that turn; you're gonna drive; it's a school zone. And then once you see the little colorful mural, you're going down two streets and then make a right ... there's gonna be one stop sign ... and then it's going to be to your left. The building is yellow."

A quick drive later confirms she is correct about all this (and it is a Shell). But does she, um, know the name of the streets?

"Nope," she says, laughing. "Not one street."

Give Boston a map, and it might as well be in a foreign language. Ask Boston to memorize a page of text, and she has no chance. But send her on a winding drive with numerous turns just one time, and she can do it again and again. Once, she had to prepare to answer a big, complicated question for a class. Her classmates studied how to complete the problem. Boston just drew the diagram from memory and got an A.

Basketball is an anticipatory sport. Some players sense where the action is going—an intuition that they can't quite explain. That's not Boston. Her feel for the game, she says, is good but not exceptional. What separates her is her visual memory. If she has seen anything once, she has seen it a thousand times.

All players watch video clips. Boston's brain creates them. Every play leaves a permanent impression on her brain. When she watches film of an upcoming opponent, she easily stores all the images and then cuts and pastes them onto the court during live action. The only way for opposing coaches to counter this would be to draw up a never-before-run play on every single possession—which is, of course, impossible. She says, "I remember everything that happens on the court and I can see it all happening, too." It is a skill that got her here, and that she has needed all season long.

From the start of her senior year, Boston has played on the best of teams and the worst of terms. South Carolina began the season at No. 1 and somehow improved from there. It outlasted then No. 2 Stanford in overtime in Palo Alto and then started whipping just about everyone it played. The Gamecocks are 32–0 heading into their NCAA tournament opener against Norfolk State.

The 6'5" Boston is a dominant physical specimen; her coach, Dawn Staley, who has coached most of the world's best players leading the U.S. women in the Olympics, thinks Boston will be one of "the top five" most powerful players in the WNBA the moment she is drafted. She also has a soft touch and smooth finishing ability. She is obviously capable of scoring 30 points against anybody, which is why she never does.

Players get guarded, stars get double-teamed and Boston gets mobbed. This scene is so customary that it starts to seem normal, but of course it isn't: Boston sets up on the block with an opponent behind her, trying futilely to hold her position ... and, because everybody knows it is futile, another player fronts Boston ... but because she is still Aliyah Boston, South Carolina passes her the ball anyway ... at which point a third and sometimes fourth player collapse upon her. Yes: sometimes a fourth player. South Carolina's video clips look like cartoons.

"No one else demands that kind of attention," Staley says. "And actually, people are pretty good at executing it. They're committed to it. ... If I'm somebody else, I do the same thing. You single-coverage her, it's over. I mean, it ain't a ball game. It ain't fair. So they have to do that. You have to beat her up."

Boston, who averaged 16.8 points on 11.9 shots per game last year, has played most of this season knowing she would never match those stats. (She averaged 13.3 points on nine shots per game.) But her mind has helped her get through it, in two ways. One is that she remembers exactly how each opponent used to guard her: "Last year was not like this at all." The other is that, even when she doesn't have room to shoot, she can help South Carolina dominate the game by directing her teammates.

Staley says she has never seen anything like it, and this is a woman who has won two national titles and coached reigning WNBA MVP A'ja Wilson in college. "A'ja ate," Staley says. "She ate real good from the midrange. Double-teamed? Yes. Not this."

Staley swears that Boston is a better player than she was last year, when she won the Naismith, Wooden and Final Four Most Outstanding Player awards. Opposing coaches know Boston will beat them, so they commit to making someone like guard Zia Cooke, center Kamilla Cardoso or forwards Laeticia Amihere or Sania Feagin beat them—which they do. Staley says, "It prolongs the loss, I guess, if you want to say it like that."

Boston's dominance has led Staley to employ some weird strategies. She thought Georgia had built so much of its game plan around stopping the forward that the best way to throw the Bulldogs off their game was to put Boston on the bench for a longer stretch than usual. So she did.

"She's unable to work on being a pro with the defenses that are being played on her," Staley says. "She's never gonna see a triple team on the next level. Ever."

Boston has gotten used to what she calls "the two-hand grab," which is exactly as it sounds: an opponent literally using both hands to grasp any available piece of her, like a fan hoping to leave with a souvenir. A patch of jersey, a forearm—grab what you want, folks! Boston says, "Some of the teams, they're not really worried about careful. They're not really worried about ... Oh, well, I'm gonna box her out, but I'm going to be aware of her legs or I'm going to be aware of her knees. No, they're just thinking, She's not going to get this."

There are rules to prevent such maulings, but they don't always seem to apply to Boston. Basketball officials have long struggled to handle large, mobile players. The physics are confusing. If a Nissan Leaf rams into a truck, the Leaf gets destroyed, so who wants to blame the driver of the Leaf? Staley says, "She gets fouled the most that's not called. How about that? We got our own little category."

Boston could push players back, but she knows refs would call fouls on her: "They always see the second one." Boston's mother, Cleone, has long urged her to flop: "I would tease her at times and say, 'Aliyah, you barely touch some of these children, and they fall. You don't want to try just falling once in a while?' She's like, 'Mom. Not gonna happen.'"

As for the refs ... "They'll tell the opposing team, 'Relax in there,'" Boston says. "I'm like, 'Well, you could just...'"



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She forms an O with her lips and makes a blowing sound.

It has all added up to a strange senior season. Boston is a near-certainty to go No. 1 in April's WNBA draft. (The Indiana Fever own the pick.) She has already won a national championship, her team is favored to win another and she is the biggest reason why. Boston should be having the kind of season that people talk about for years, and instead, as assistant Fred Chmiel says, "She's the returning National Player of the Year and she's getting eight shots [a game]."

Boston admits it bothers her at times, but she says, "I know what's happening. I know how I'm being played. And I know how our team is." March could provide a sterner test of the defensive strategy and her poise in dealing with it. For now, the visual wizard has taken her social media apps off the home screen on her phone, so she doesn't see anybody talk about her "declining" play. It helps that in her toughest moments, she can remember exactly how she got here.

When Aliyah was 12, her parents sent her and her sister, Alexis, to Worcester, Mass., to live with their aunt Jenaire Hodge, "because I know my sister the way I know myself," Cleone says. "She's the best." The goal was simple, and it was shared: to earn college sports scholarships. Cleone says the move was painful: "When Alexis and Aliyah were on St. Thomas you couldn't look around, left nor right, and not see me with them." Aliyah's father, Al, still says with a laugh he wasn't consulted on the decision, a running joke in the family that may feature a kernel of truth.

The decision was certainly unconventional. But it was ultimately successful (Alexis played basketball at NAIA Thomas University), and it shaped Aliyah in ways that nobody could have foreseen at the time. The Bostons managed the trick most parents of teenagers struggle to accomplish: They let their kids go and still held them tight.

"I had points when I would just call [Al] crying," Cleone says. "Easter came around, and I was in tears. I'm like, 'I need to see the girls.' And he was like, 'Go ahead.' And I bought a ticket and I was in Massachusetts for the weekend. No special plans. I just needed to be there."

In St. Thomas, Cleone used to pray with her daughters every morning before school and decided they would keep doing it, even if that meant calling them at 5 a.m. The girls were required to call—not text—back. After a while, Aliyah and Alexis got comfortable in Massachusetts and stopped communicating as quickly with their parents. Cleone deleted the data plan from their phones until they started calling back more. (Even now, she will call Aliyah at 7:30 a.m.; Aliyah puts her phone on "Do Not Disturb," but Cleone has figured out that she can override that by calling multiple times. They talk every day.)

Al would call Aliyah (the family calls her Peaches) to talk basketball, and that is when Aliyah realized she had this gift: She could recite exactly what happened on plays, with a level of detail that started to strike her as odd.

"She had like a photographic memory of games," Cleone says. "She would explain the entire play, why it transpired the way they did and what happened."

Unlike many prodigies, Aliyah did not feel like her athletic prowess made her the center of the universe. She is well aware of what her mom and dad had given up for her. Chmiel says: "Aliyah has the weight of the world on her shoulders, but you would never know it." She is conscious of her parents' sacrifice but not burdened by it.

"What impressed me the most wasn't the changes that I saw," Cleone says of Aliyah's time in Worcester. "It was the things that remained the same. She still was the same kind-hearted person. She still was the girl whose friends would not be the stars on the team. They would be just the kids in the school that you wouldn't normally find in the company of the stars."

Boston still has a champion's will and a caretaker's heart. After one game this season, a fan asked Chmiel to find Boston so she could sign a picture for her son. Boston had gone home. Chmiel offered to take the picture to her and have her sign it. When he brought it to her, she looked at the photo, recognized the boy and said, "I take a picture with him almost every game." She happily signed another. When freshman Chloe Kitts showed up as a midseason enrollee this winter, it was Boston who sat with her on a bench after practice and went through plays with her. "Nobody asked her to do that," Chmiel says. "She's trying to help the kid get acclimated, trying to help her learn the offense, so she can be a more integral part of the team." On Christmas, Chmiel texted all the players to wish them a merry Christmas. Boston is the only one who texted him first.

Boston was a top-three recruit out of high school, but even then, the Gamecocks did not quite realize what they had in her. Staley says, "She didn't show us anything extraordinary during the recruiting process, physically. Her presence, obviously. [But] she didn't get the ball a whole lot. She wasn't great at making layups." What Staley noticed early was Boston's mouth. She was always talking to her teammates: encouraging, cajoling, advising. Though Staley didn't fully understand it, Boston was perpetually sharing the wisdom that comes from her most unusual mind.

"The reason most kids don't talk is because they don't know what to say," Chmiel says. "She always knows what to say."

There are downsides to her genius. Boston has never watched her missed layup at the end of a national semifinal loss to Stanford two years ago, but she sees it vividly all the time in her head.

"It's very, very, very hard," Boston says. "Sometimes I get annoyed, because things linger in my head. I wish I could, like, fix it. If I know that I didn't do something right, I just see it over. And I'm like: Why didn't I just do something else? Why didn't I just do something else? Why didn't I just do something else? Everything is always processing."

Opponents see a physical talent who requires triple teams. Fans see a player who could score much more but doesn't. But don't just watch. Listen. "I'm afraid of what the gym's gonna sound like next year," Staley says. "I really am—for our team. I am afraid because she covers up a lot for everybody." All that attention, all season long, and Aliyah Boston is still the reason her team dominates. Elbow her, hack her, send help from the wings. You can never shut down her brain.

###



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The South Carolina Player Taking Basketball to Girls in West Africa

Jere Longman, New York Times
Marc 23, 2023

COLUMBIA, S.C. — In the first two rounds of the women's N.C.A.A. basketball tournament, it became clear why Dawn Staley calls Laeticia Amihere the most versatile player she has ever coached at South Carolina.

A lithe, 6-foot-4-inch reserve forward, Amihere, 21, can play and defend all five positions on the court. Against Norfolk State and South Florida in the opening rounds, she shadowed point guards above the 3-point line, guarded forwards on the wing, led the fast break and slashed into the lane for jumpers and follow shots. At one point, she emphatically swatted a shot at one end of the floor and sprinted with the elegant stride of an 400-meter runner for a layup on the other end.

"It's not like there's a drop-off no matter what position that she plays," Staley said. "I've never coached anybody that comes with that much determination. Put her anywhere."

Amihere's basketball career, beset early by knee injuries sustained in high school outside of Toronto and later by family bereavement, has flourished of late: She was a member of Canada's Olympic team at the 2021 Tokyo Games and of the 2022 national championship team at South Carolina. She has been an activist for equal treatment of female players by the N.C.A.A. And she is the founder of a nonprofit designed to spread the sport to underserved youth in Canada and in West Africa, from which her parents emigrated. A senior, she is pursuing a master's degree in sport and entertainment management.

On Saturday, top-ranked South Carolina (34-0) continues its heavily favored march toward a second consecutive national championship. It will face U.C.L.A. (27-9) in a regional semifinal in Greenville, S.C., which is effectively a second home for the Gamecocks.

In early March, when South Carolina won the Southeastern Conference tournament in Greenville, forward Aliyah Boston, the reigning national player of the year, was named the most valuable player. But she graciously gave her trophy to Amihere, who delivered 37 points and 13 rebounds in the team's three SEC tournament games.

"The entire tournament she was dominating," Boston said. "I felt she deserved to be recognized."

Early this season, South Carolina faced U.C.L.A. at home in Columbia. The game remained tied after three quarters before the Gamecocks held the Bruins to three field goals in the final 10 minutes and pulled away to win, 73-64. It was emblematic of South Carolina's familiar relentlessness, smothering defense and refusal to panic.

Particularly imposing is the size, agility and depth of its front line. There often appears to be little decline when the starters — Boston, who is 6-foot-5, and Victoria Saxton, who is 6-foot-2 — are given breather by the 6-foot-7 Kamilla Cardoso, a mobile scorer, rebounder and shot blocker, and by Amihere, who plays with graceful efficiency.

Amihere shoehorned 11 points, 2 rebounds, 2 steals and 2 blocks into 16-plus minutes against Norfolk State, and 10 points, 6 rebounds and 1 block into 15-plus minutes against South Florida.

In the first and second rounds, South Carolina's bench outscored its opponents' reserves by a combined 71-8.

"They come at you in waves," South Florida Coach Jose Fernandez said.

A native of Mississauga, Ontario, which neighbors Toronto, Amihere played soccer and ran track as a young girl, which helped her footwork and agility, but she did not play basketball until the sixth or seventh grade. Tall and gangly, she said she felt socially awkward. She grew tired of being asked whether she played basketball and took up the sport just to be able to say yes.

"I was kind of embarrassed being tall," Amihere said. "But when I started playing basketball, I came into my body. There weren't a lot of tall women around me before that. It gave me that confidence."

Still only 14, she became the leading rebounder and shot-blocker at the 2016 under-17 world championships. At 15, she was credited as the first Canadian woman to dunk during a game. At the Tokyo Olympics, Amihere hoped to face the United States and Staley, its coach, but Canada did not reach the knockout rounds. Until then, Amihere said with a laugh, Staley kept messaging her, saying, "I'm cheering for you until we play each other."

Her college choice was made, in part, in 2017, while Amihere watched Kia Nurse, a fellow Canadian, play for Connecticut in the Final Four as Mississippi State ended the Huskies' 111-game winning streak and scuttled any chance they'd win a fifth consecutive national title. Two days later, South Carolina defeated Mississippi State and cut down the nets with its first championship.

Amihere wanted to play for a team that could beat UConn, and did in the 2022 national title game.

"A lot of people were thinking the same thing, and we all came to South Carolina," Amihere said. "Now everybody wants to beat South Carolina. We're actually more excited this go-around, but it's harder to win twice in a row. Everybody's gunning for you."

After the N.C.A.A.'s discriminatory treatment of female basketball players was exposed during the 2021 tournaments, Amihere, at Staley's urging, used a student advisory committee to advocate such gender-equity upgrades as having the same number of women's teams in the field — 68 — as in the men's bracket.

Last summer, Amihere traveled to the Ivory Coast, the home country of her mother, Georgette, to conduct basketball clinics for girls. Her work there was for a nonprofit she founded called Back to the Motherland. The challenge, Amihere said, is overcoming cultural barriers and "just really trying to expose to them that you can be more than a traditional woman who cooks and cleans."

She plans to continue her nonprofit work while playing professionally, to pay forward the help others gave her in high school: A coach who paid her fees to play on a travel team. Her aunt and godmother, Olga Lambert, who drove her to basketball practice regularly, an hour or more each way, while undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer. Lambert died in October 2022 at age 62. (An older brother, Kofi, died last August at age 30.)

When she considered giving up basketball after two serious knee injuries in high school, Amihere said, her aunt's encouragement and brave struggle inspired her to keep playing. Now she wears pink sneakers in her aunt's honor, marked with "Tante Olga" and "Superwoman."

"She's always been my No. 1 motivation," Amihere said. "I can't let up because of that."

###



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South Carolina assistant coach Jolette Law is 'one of the best that's ever done it'

Sean Hurd, Andscape
March 24, 2023

Jolette Law remembers when her coaching career was a blank canvas.

In 1994, Law had just accepted her first coaching job as an assistant at Ball State after multiple world tours over four years as one of the first women to play for the Harlem Globetrotters.

"I had no idea what I was doing. No idea," said Law, formerly a standout point guard at Iowa under legendary coach C. Vivian Stringer.

What Law lacked in coaching experience she made up for in ambition. She quickly dedicated herself to the profession.

Law closely followed the careers of coaches she looked up to – coaches such as Geno Auriemma, whom she watched build UConn from the ground up. She attended coaching academies held by Tara VanDerveer, whose offensive mind fascinated her. She admired the way Renee Brown, then a skillful recruiter as an assistant at Kansas, carried herself on the court as she coached under Marian Washington.

When Law would go out on the recruiting trail, she watched what top recruiters such as UConn's Chris Dailey or Tennessee's Mickie DeMoss did. She studied their mannerisms and their habits in the gym. The best recruiters, for example, got to the gym early and left late, and they didn't sit in the stands talking to everyone.

When Law was told that, as an assistant coach, she'd need to learn how to sell a program, she went out and bought books by John Maxwell about leadership and how to be an influencer. Anything she could do to become a better coach, she did.

"I picked people's brains. I watched. I studied," Law said.

Nearly three decades since her coaching career began, Law now stands as one of the top assistants and recruiters in the country, on the top team in the country, the South Carolina Gamecocks. She's been to more than 20 NCAA tournaments, assembled numerous top recruiting classes for her programs and is a championship-winning coach. In some ways, Law's impact has gone overlooked as she's supported some of the best coaches in the game while waiting patiently for her next opportunity to lead a team of her own.

But make no mistake, says Usha Gilmore, who's now the athletic director at Division III Illinois Tech. She was coached by and has coached alongside Law:

"[Jolette] is one of the best that's ever done it."

As a player at Iowa in the late 1980s, Law was awestruck by the knowledge of the game Stringer exhibited daily. As the team's point guard, Law, who helped lead Iowa to multiple Elite Eights during her tenure, had to be an extension of Stringer on the court.

Law had to think like Stringer and see the floor as Stringer did. At times, she even went back to her dorm room and mimicked her – walking through hypothetical game situations in which she predicted what her head coach would do. While Law always imitated her coach, she never thought she'd later become one herself.

Stringer saw the coaching potential within Law early, telling Law often that she'd make a great coach. Law emphatically rejected the idea at the time.

"'You have a high basketball IQ. Your passion for the game. Your work ethic. People can relate to you. You're going to be a great coach one day,'" Law said Stringer told her.

Law joined Stringer's staff after she accepted the head coaching position at Rutgers in 1995. Law quickly evolved from Stringer's pupil to her top assistant. Stringer taught Law to approach coaching with an insatiable appetite to learn, to always be prepared and to be three steps ahead.

Perhaps most important were Stringer's lessons about attention to detail. During one of her early seasons at Rutgers, Law submitted a scouting report to Stringer for an upcoming matchup against Tennessee.

Later that evening, Law's phone rang. On the line was Stringer. It was 1 a.m.

"Jolette, No. 8, you didn't have the cut," said Stringer, who spotted a hole in Law's scouting of a Tennessee play.

"Coach, that was a read," said Law, who trusted her original observation.

"No, no," replied Stringer, who instructed Law to see for herself. Law found the corresponding VHS tape, turning the counter to the appropriate play. Stringer pointed out the player action once more.

"She made that cut, she came back and that wasn't in the scouting report."

While Law maintains to this day that it was, in fact, a read, that moment forever changed how she broke down film. To master the craft was to understand that no detail could go uncovered. That's what separated the good from the great. Law adopted that habit.

"From that point on, every cut, I don't even know if they were going to get a glass of water, if I saw it on the tape, I made sure every cut, everything, was on that scouting report. She made me detail-oriented."

As a child growing up in Florence, South Carolina, Law watched as her dad Joseph masterfully sold cars. Law would travel with him to her uncle's used car dealership and watch as her dad went out on the lot and somehow convinced a customer who walked into the dealership to leave driving a new vehicle.

"He would say, 'it's all about relationships. You've got to build them, you've got to cultivate them, you've got to maintain them,'" Law said of her father.

That lesson from her father, the ability to connect with and relate to others, became the foundation of her approach as a recruiter, though Law emphasized one clear distinction.



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"I'm not a used car person, I'm not one of those," Law said. "I tell the truth."

Over time, Law has had to adjust her approach to recruiting to adapt to the different generations of players. But the core of her approach has never fluctuated. She calls them her laws to live by: Be up front, be consistent and be truthful in what you're doing.

"She's authentic. What you see is what you get," said Cal State Northridge head coach Carlene Mitchell, who coached with Law on the Rutgers staff for six seasons. "She's been around a lot of great players. Those players, everyone tells them what they want to hear. Jollette is great at telling them what they need to hear."

At South Carolina, coach Dawn Staley calls Law her insurance policy. When Staley and her staff identify which high school recruits they'd like to target, they turn to Law. During her time, Law has helped to create multiple No. 1 recruiting classes for the Gamecocks.

"[Jollette will] just say, 'OK, thank you, I got it from here,'" Staley said. "She's got an incredible heart for people. For young people. Because of that, she connects with them."

Gilmore will never forget her Law recruitment story. Gilmore was a talented recruit from the Class of 1996 whom Law and Stringer wanted at Rutgers. Gilmore had been heavily recruited and Law knew that if she wanted to land her commitment, she'd have to stand out. Law recalled a previous conversation she had with Gilmore, one in which Gilmore raved about her favorite new song.

"Back then — I hate to admit this — I was a huge R. Kelly fan," said Gilmore. "One of my favorite songs was 'You Remind Me of My Jeep' ['You Remind Me of Something']. They drove up to my house in a Jeep.

"I'm from the South. I like chitlins. On my official visit, they made sure somebody was able to cook some chitlins at Rutgers. It was that extra effort that Coach Law does, that extra attention to detail."

Gilmore would ultimately decommit from her home state school, South Carolina, and change her commitment to Law, Stringer and Rutgers.

In 2007, after 12 years at Rutgers, Law made the decision to take a leap and accept her first head coaching job. She took a job at Illinois sight unseen, grateful for a university and its administration for taking a chance on her to lead its program. She was quickly thrown into the fire in a position where she was learning on the job.

While at Rutgers, Law did a little bit of everything for the program. She was entrusted with recruiting, scouting, players, academics, even sitting in on budget meetings. She learned quickly, however, that as a head coach she had to be a better manager and delegator.

At Illinois, she said, she stretched herself too thin.

"I needed to do a better job of getting people around me that could cover my weaknesses and enhance my strengths," Law said.

Law produced two winning seasons leading the Fighting Illini, but her teams struggled in the Big Ten. She was fired by Illinois after five seasons, leaving the program with an overall record of 69-93.

Law's tenure at Illinois was unlike anything she had experienced. When it came to basketball, Law was very much cut from the cloth of success. Despite her efforts with the Illinois program, she didn't get the same winning results she had expected.

Law said while failure hurt her, it also made her a better coach.

"It motivated me," Law said. "I'm a better assistant coach because of my experience as a head coach at Illinois. If given the opportunity again, I won't make those same mistakes."

Gilmore served on Law's staff during her final two years in Illinois. Watching Law struggle to find that breakthrough in her program was tough.

"It was definitely disappointing," Gilmore said. "I just don't think she had enough time."

Just as Law's time in Champaign ended, her next opportunity was already in motion. As soon as Law left the Illinois athletic director's office, she got a call from legendary Tennessee coach Pat Summitt.

Summitt informed Law that she would be stepping down as the head coach of Tennessee after being diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. Summitt wanted Law to serve on the coaching staff of her successor, Holly Warlick.

Law spent five years at Tennessee, when the Lady Vols made five tournament appearances and advanced to the Elite Eight three times. She played a key role in Tennessee landing the No. 1 and No. 3 recruiting classes in 2017 and 2013, respectively.

In the summer of 2017, Law was on vacation in Jamaica when she received a call from Staley. After winning her first national championship as the head coach of South Carolina, Staley had an open spot on her coaching staff after the departure of Nikki McCray-Penson, who had been named head coach at Old Dominion.

"Dawn asked me, 'are you ready to come back home?'" Law said.

Law going to South Carolina wasn't a decision based solely on professional trajectory — it was also personal. Law's mother Lena had been diagnosed with a rare disease in her liver that required Law to drive back and forth from Tennessee to South Carolina. Coming to South Carolina allowed Law to be just an hour away from her mom, who could attend games and watch Law on the sidelines.

Law's mother died in March 2021, while Law was with South Carolina in Texas for the national championship game against Stanford.

The 2021-22 season was one of the toughest Law had endured as she wrestled with the absence of her mother.

"I knew every day, every step of the way, she was my motivation," Law said.

The Gamecocks ended the year as champions, Law's first, as her brother and nephew watched from the stands.



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“When we won the national championship, you drop to your knees,” Law said. “It was one of the most remarkable feelings in the world. It was a beautiful thing.”

At South Carolina, Law’s focus is defense. She enjoys scouring film to study a team’s offensive tendencies until she unlocks the key that will disrupt them. Her goal is to make the game a little ugly. Over the course of a game Law, who sits to the right of Staley, is constantly looking at South Carolina’s defensive presence, analyzing what’s working, what should change or how they can mix in different looks to throw off the opposition.

For someone with a defensive mindset, Law feels like a coach in a candy store with this year’s South Carolina roster, which is loaded with athletic, high IQ, defensive talent.

“It’s a very privileged place to be when you can scheme differently, you can go tall, small, quick, or you could just go power,” Law said. “I’m fortunate that I’m able to do that with Coach Staley and our staff.”

Staley says one of Law’s talents is being able to get players to buy into defense, particularly those who didn’t enter the program with defensive prowess. Staley used the example of Brea Beal, who came to South Carolina having scored more points in Illinois than Candace Parker. But Law saw her potential to be a defensive stopper for South Carolina.

Staley credits Law for being able to tap into Beal’s competitive nature, work with her to believe in her ability to defend and do it every single day. Beal is considered to be one of the best defenders in college basketball.

“She likes to challenge our players, those who don’t think defense is a priority,” Staley said. “She takes those players and she just finds a way to connect with them to connect with defense.”

Sometimes that connection extends beyond the court. Every now and then, Law will be called over by one of her South Carolina players, who all approach her with the same look of disbelief after discovering the history of their assistant coach.

“You were in a MC Hammer music video?” The players will exclaim, after watching Law’s cameo in MC Hammer’s “2 Legit 2 Quit” in 1991. “Oh, my God, you were a Globetrotter? We saw you on YouTube!”

“Back when I was coming up, you had to really dig to find some footage. I’m like, this stuff needs to be staying in the archives,” joked Law.

Law has had several head coaching opportunities arise over the last decade she’s served as an assistant coach. But this time around, Law has exercised a cautious patience. She wants her next job to be her last job.

“Now that I’m older, I have the opportunity of seeing things differently,” Law said. “I’m more seasoned. When the time is right, I know I’m ready. I’m prepared.”

Last offseason, Law believed that opportunity might have arrived. After a 27-year tenure, Stringer was retiring as Rutgers head coach. After spending 12 years at Rutgers, many as the right-hand woman of Stringer, Law saw yet another chance to return home. The anticipation built as Law’s phone rang with colleagues telling her Rutgers was what she had been waiting for. Those calls included Stringer herself.

“Coach Stringer was like, ‘I want you to be here.’ I think she really wanted me to be her successor,” Law said.

But Law didn’t get the job. Rutgers decided to hire Coquese Washington, another coach who had long been searching for her second opportunity as a head coach, as Stringer’s successor. It’s the only time Law has ended a hiring cycle feeling a sense of disappointment.

“I think a part of me thought that the Rutgers job was my job to have, Law said. “God saw that that wasn’t the job that he has for me. In my mind, he gave it to me that I need more for you to do – I’m not finished, you’re not finished – with your assignment here at South Carolina.”

Law recently looked over her coaching résumé and surprised herself with just how much she’s accomplished during her career.

“It’s not until you put it on paper that you see how many Final Fours. How many NAAs,” Law said. “I’ve been truly blessed with great players and great people.”

After 30 years in the coaching game, the daily grind hasn’t gotten old to Law. She continues to work with her players with the same vigor her mentors worked with her, driven by a passion for the game that only grows deeper.

In due time, she’ll likely add a new program to her résumé, one she’ll call her own. But before doing so, there’s one more title she’d like to add first: two-time national champion.

“I’m a strong believer that I trust God. When he tells me to go, I’m going to go,” Law said. “But in the meantime, I’m loving life here being a South Carolina Gamecock. ... We’re on our way to see if we can do this thing back to back.”

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Gamecocks' Brea Beal again brings defensive mastery to Sweet 16

David Cloninger, Post & Courier
March 24, 2023

COLUMBIA — It's the smile.

It splits Brea Beal's face, even in a crucial moment. She's guarding LSU's Kateri Poole, attempting to keep her where she is as No. 1 South Carolina closes in on another massive win.

Poole is dribbling, moving, spinning, trying to get free. Beal, bent at the waist, arms resembling two rattlesnakes with her hands as the heads, poised to strike with lethal quickness to poke the ball loose, is shifting, planting, bouncing in a way that would explode any set of knees above age 30.

The smile spreads as Poole keeps trying to find something to do — drive, shoot, pass. Angel Reese sees her teammate struggling and rushes to try and set a screen on Beal; Beal doesn't even turn her head as she effortlessly slips past.

Finally, a frustrated Poole dumps the ball in the corner to Reese, who gets bailed out on a foul at the rim. Reese makes one of two free throws. The Gamecocks have a 10-point lead at halftime and win by 24.

LSU, previously the only other undefeated team in the country besides USC, slinks out of Colonial Life Arena. Beal watches, with the smile still intact, and not just for the victory.

The smile also reflects a mastery of her craft, the satisfaction of seeing another victim that couldn't overcome that mastery. Having height and a wingspan helps, jumping ability matters. But overall, one has to want to play defense.

Brea Beal wants to be the best defender in the country. And as her college career (likely) comes to a close over the next two weeks, she won't say it herself, but the performances speak for themselves.

During the Gamecocks' six-game run to last year's national championship, Beal's six primary assignments, almost always the opponent's best shooter, combined to average 78.1 points per game during their seasons.

Beal helped limit those six players to 29 points, an average of 4.8 per game during the tournament.

"She knows what your best move is. She knows what your counter is, and she just waits," coach Dawn Staley said. "She forces you into those situations, and you've got to go to your third option as an individual player, and by then if you have to go through your first, second, and third, your teammates are standing around. So we've got you."

Louisville's Hailey Van Lith came into a Final Four matchup with the Gamecocks with 20 or more points during each of her first four tournament games. She exited with nine against Beal.

Connecticut's Paige Bueckers was the most dangerous shooter in the national championship game, and Beal and Destanni Henderson switched on and off her, Beal taking Christyn Williams when she didn't have Bueckers. Bueckers finished with 14.

Williams? Two.

"I think it's just something I fell into and it was just something I became great at, and then it became natural. It's not anything ... like anyone I look up to or anything I look after," Beal said. "It's just a skill that I didn't know I had in high school, and I just became great at it, I guess."

That's where it started, at Rock Island (Ill.) High, where she was destined to become a three-time Ms. Basketball winner and scored over 2,700 points. The defense was always there; it's just that nobody noticed much with all of those points.

"For us, her role was to get 25 and 15 and guard the best player," said Henry Hall, Beal's coach. "People would look and say, 'Ah, Brea's not scoring,' and I'd say, 'You're not watching the game, though. Just watch her guard people.'"

"We got to see it in four years of practice. Nothing that she does shocks me."

Hall credited it to Beal being a student of the game, understanding that all of the points she could score would be rendered meaningless if the team gave up the same amount or more. As a senior, she was on a path that would turn her into a defender that stalked SEC courts for the past four years, and it also unknowingly helped her transition as a USC freshman.

Fall, 2019. Staley was two seasons removed from a national championship and massive changes were in store.

A'ja Wilson was off to a professional career that has thus far netted two MVP awards and a league championship. Staley welcomed the nation's top recruiting class, but was hesitant about doing what she knew she was probably going to have to do.

Starting freshmen is a tricky proposition, but Staley had three that seemed ready — Aliyah Boston, Zia Cooke and Beal. With seniors Mikiah Herbert Harrigan and Ty Harris alongside, it looked like a strong starting five, provided the rookies weren't afraid of the moment.

They weren't, although Beal certainly had to tweak her game. The other four were doing a lot of the scoring.

Beal brought more than points.

"She's one of those kids, she's going to play within the tapestry of what the coach wants to do," Hall said. "It's hard to find people that are elite on defense. She rebounds too well. Her basketball IQ is off the charts, it's nuts."



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She became the do-everything player, willing to score if needed but concentrating on the other end of the floor. Her defense flourished as a junior, and picked up well-deserved recognition as a senior.

Beal is one of four finalists for the Naismith Defensive Player of the Year Award (Boston, last year's winner, is also a finalist). It's gotten her onto the pro radar, where a team that values defense could make her a first-round pick.

"I think it's just a mentality to have every single game. You can't just turn it on and turn it off when you choose to," Beal said. "It's a talent I've grown and added to since I was a freshman."

As the Gamecocks play their Sweet 16 game against UCLA on Saturday in Greenville, Beal will be assigned to Kiki Rice or Charisma Osborne, the Bruins' excellent guards.

She packed her smile.

###



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How South Carolina's 6-foot-7 Kamilla Cardoso found growth at South Carolina

Chantel Jennings, The Athletic
March 25, 2023

GREENVILLE, S.C. — It's almost impossible, even on an elite basketball team, for a 6-foot-7 player to hide in plain sight. But in South Carolina practices last season, that's exactly what Kamilla Cardoso attempted to do. When the players lined up, even among the bigs, Cardoso sunk her shoulders and dipped her head enough to make sure didn't look like the tallest player on the court.

When reporters came around, Cardoso happily retreated into the background, letting the stars around her take center stage. And when interview requests did come her way, she almost always declined.

When Cardoso transferred to South Carolina from Syracuse during the summer of 2021, the Gamecocks coaches pretty much all had the same impression: Cardoso didn't realize exactly how good she could be. But they also knew, for her to get to that point — or even close to that point — she needed to embrace her size and potential.

Immediately, the staff began building her confidence. They told her how good she could be and how important she was to the team, how if she shouldered more of the big moments, it would help South Carolina. In practices, when she caught the ball, everyone often shouted, "Shoot it, Kamilla!" The attention sometimes startled her, and she'd pass off the ball, shrugging her shoulders and sinking her head in an apology of sorts.

But they continued to remind her: You can be great if you accept that you can be great.

"It was repetition," said Fred Chmiel, the Gamecocks' post coach. "It was making sure she understood in the moment that this is who she is and can be. ... It was constant reminders every single day in practice."

Slowly, it began to take. But as the season wore on and the rotation tightened, Cardoso showed that growth mainly in practice. The people around her noticed and believed she could blossom.

When the offseason came, Cardoso returned home to Brazil for the first time in years. She moved to the U.S. when she was 15 to attend high school in Tennessee. In Brazil, her basketball opportunities were limited, even on her team there — one that was considered good for her age group — she played tournaments only three or four times a year.

"Basketball in Brazil is not developed. People don't care about girls' basketball in Brazil," Cardoso said. "It was really hard."

But after her stay back home for several months, she came back to Columbia, S.C., with a new and stronger confidence. Even on the South Carolina team with four returning starters and deeper with transfers and freshmen talent, Cardoso looked like she could be an X-factor in the Gamecocks' quest to repeat as national champs.

South Carolina's numbers, which were already astronomical, improved even more as a byproduct of Cardoso's confidence. The nation's No. 1 shot-blocking team became even more adept at swatting away opponents' shots thanks to Cardoso's now two blocks per game average. The No. 3 rebounding team in the country last season became the nation's second-best rebounding team. The Gamecocks ranked second in defensive rating a year ago, and they stepped to the top spot in that category this year, helped no doubt in part by Cardoso's imposing presence in the paint serving as a massive deterrent for any opponent even considering a shot attempt within eight feet.

The "Shoot the ball, Kamilla!" shouts became fewer and further between as Cardoso finally shot the ball more (taking nearly twice as many shots this year as she did last). When she draws contact in the paint, she doesn't shrink or hang her head; Chmiel saw her begin to welcome that contact and finish through it.

Even as she comes off the bench, Cardoso's impact necessitates opponents scheme for her. When she was playing just 18 minutes a game, she was a constant double-double threat, one that earned her the SEC's Sixth Woman of the Year.

This season, her efficiency numbers have been off the charts. In win shares per 40 minutes — a statistic that weighs a player's contributions to her team's wins while accounting for minutes played — Cardoso is the third-most valuable player in the country behind just LSU's Angel Reese and Villanova's Maddy Siegrist. Cardoso still logs less than 19 minutes a game, but she has established herself as a dominant player, and one who's more comfortable with that level of dominance on the floor.

"Kamilla has definitely come out of her shell," Aliyah Boston said. "It took her some time, but I think she's really comfortable in being that dominant player that she is and the player that we need her to be."

Though her efficiency, rebounding and scoring have been crucial to South Carolina's win total, her ability to block shots has been an unmatched spark when the Gamecocks need it most.

"Those really just bring so much energy, not only to our bench but to our fans," said Bree Hall, noting one chase-down block in particular in the Gamecocks' Sweet 16 win over UCLA on Saturday. "It really gets us going and it really just brings us together."

Those are the kinds of plays Cardoso has always had the capability to make, but now — with her added confidence — they come a bit more naturally. After all, it's easier to block those shots and chase down players when your shoulders aren't hunched over. There are still times, coaches see, when she feels guilty about being great. How she'll suppress a grin when she knocks down a shot that she wouldn't have considered taking last year, or how she'll be the first to help up an opponent who she has just stuffed. "She smiles a lot out there on the court," coach Dawn Staley said, "but she's a competitor."

Fans and opponents see the numbers and blocks and realize the strides Cardoso has made. But the coaches see something more. They see a player who doesn't sink her shoulders as much, doesn't dip her head as often. They see a player who doesn't mind doing interviews and will shoot (without being yelled at). Cardoso's growth has been obvious in ways large and small, and the best part, coaches say, is that she's still only getting started.

"She's barely tapping into it now," Chmiel added. "She has made huge strides from last year. The sky is the limit. The thing is for Kamilla, she doesn't realize it all the time."



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Dawn Staley timeout for UCLA player injury heralded as moment of sportsmanship

Jeremiah Holloway, The State
March 25, 2023

UCLA women's basketball coach Cori Close was, naturally, disappointed after her team's season ended Saturday with a Sweet 16 loss to South Carolina.

But that didn't stop her from praising USC coach Dawn Staley for what Close described as a revealing moment of sportsmanship and class amid USC's 59-43 win.

South Carolina was leading UCLA 46-30 late in the third quarter at Bon Secours Wellness Arena when Emily Bessoir, one of the Bruins' starting forwards, was hurt while battling with USC's Aliyah Boston for a rebound after a missed shot.

Bessoir remained under the basket, rolling around in pain, as South Carolina advanced the ball up the court into a clear advantage — five offensive players against four defensive players. A nearby referee had noticed Bessoir's injury but did not call an injury timeout.

So the SEC Coach of the Year took things into her own hands: Instead of pushing to extend USC's 16-point lead against a woman-down UCLA defense, Staley called a 30-second timeout at the 1:22 mark of the third quarter so Bessoir could get medical attention.

"That's exactly what it showed: her class and her global view of the game and what was most important in that moment," Close said. "She did call that timeout only because of Emily being down. ... Right after the play, I just turned to her and I just said, 'Thank you, Dawn,' and she acknowledged it."

Close and Staley have a strong professional relationship. Outside of coaching at their respective schools for well over a decade apiece, they've also overlapped within the Women's Basketball Coaches Association, which represents NCAA coaches. (Close is the current president.)

"I mean, I think these kind of moments in games, they reveal people's character," Close said. "And I think it just revealed a layer of her character, of what she deems most important, and that's always the kids."

ESPN's broadcast team also noted Staley's timeout after initially being confused on whether Staley or an official called for time after Bessoir's apparent thigh injury. Speaking postgame, Staley confirmed she called the timeout exclusively so Bessoir could get checked out.

"I mean, I don't like to see players go down in any situation," Staley said. "If we can control the situation, we can get (help) — you never know what type of injury it is, so you want to get medical attention over to them as quickly as possible. It was the right thing to do. It was the right thing to do to make sure the young lady was OK."

After leading 25-15 at halftime, South Carolina outscored UCLA 25-15 in the third quarter to build up an insurmountable lead and eventually cruise into the Elite Eight. South Carolina, the No. 1 overall seed in the bracket and reigning national champion, will play Maryland on Monday (7 p.m., ESPN) for a Final Four berth.

Close was already a fan of the 35-0 Gamecocks, describing them after the game as perhaps the best defensive and rebounding team she's ever coached against. But Staley's in-game sportsmanship may have taken her South Carolina admiration to a new level.

Thankfully for UCLA, Bessoir's injury wasn't too serious: She subbed back into the game at the start of the fourth quarter, played four minutes and finished having played 15 minutes and scored six points with three rebounds.

Staley said calling a timeout was simply the right thing to do.

"I know Cori," Staley said. "I would have done it for anybody, though, but I know Cori well, and I know the type of coach and person that she is. She would have done it — she would have done the same thing had one of our players went down."

###



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South Carolina's strength isn't just Aliyah Boston. It's depth.

Lindsay Schnell, USA Today
March 25, 2023

Like many of you, I picked No. 1 overall seed South Carolina to repeat as national champ. But my reasoning might have been different than yours.

Believe it or not, it wasn't because of Aliyah Boston, excellent as she is. While the senior has a strong chance to repeat as national player of the year and is easily the most important piece of the Gamecocks roster, she's not the biggest issue for opposing teams. It's her teammates, led by SEC Sixth Woman of the Year Kamilla Cardoso, who really create problems.

Boston, along with the rest of the starting five led South Carolina to the overall No. 1 seed and the presumptive favorite to repeat as national champions. Most in women's basketball — including South Carolina's Sweet 16 opponent, fourth-seeded UCLA — would love to have even one of the Gamecocks starters on their roster. But they'd also be thrilled to get a reserve.

And that's exactly why South Carolina, which faces the Bruins Saturday at 2 p.m. ET, is likely to win another championship — the strength of the Gamecocks' bench.

South Carolina separates with bench play

Boston is the best player in the game. She sets the tone for South Carolina on both ends of the floor and is who opponents game plan around. But the Gamecocks separate themselves with their bench — which was clear Sunday with its 76-45 win over eighth-seeded South Florida.

You might have seen online that people were freaking out about South Carolina trailing 16-12 after the first quarter, and only leading 32-29 at half.

Not to worry. Coach Dawn Staley turned to her bench — which is regularly outscoring opponents' benches by close to 25 points per game. Going into the NCAA Tournament, South Carolina's reserves accounted for 45% of the team's offense. This season, eight different players have led South Carolina in scoring.

In the second round, the Gamecocks' second string answered, with the reserves pouring in 30 points. While starting guard Zia Cooke led the way with 21 points, 11 different Gamecocks scored at least two (three players did not score).

How many other teams can say they've got 14 (14!) players who are ready to compete for a national championship? Answer: None of them.

It's rare, at best, to have multiple All-American candidates on one roster. Boston was a lock as a repeat All-American. Cooke made a strong case as did Brea Beal, the nation's best one-on-one defender. Personally, I was tempted to vote Cardoso.

In the paint, the 6-foot-7 junior forward is a giant among bigs, her fingertips practically grazing the rim when she goes to rebound. She plucks missed shots off the glass and effortlessly lays them back up, then lopes down the court to alter the opposition's shots. The Brazil native averages 9.7 points, 8.6 rebounds and 1.9 blocks in just 18 minutes per game.

Read that again: Almost 10 points, nine rebounds and two blocks per game and in less than a half of play. That's the type of production and efficiency coaches drool over ... or weep over, depending on who they're rooting for.

UConn didn't have depth. The Gamecocks do.

It's natural to compare what Staley is building in Columbia, South Carolina, to what Geno Auriemma has built in Storrs, Connecticut. The Huskies have won 11 national championships and been to 14 consecutive Final Fours.

But depth has never been a major part of UConn's game plan. The Huskies typically beat teams because they had seven to eight really good players, most of whom were McDonald's All-Americans. They blitzed teams early and intimidated opponents before they ever took the floor. UConn was always the favorite as long as no one got injured. This year, the Huskies have been hampered by injuries, and it's taken a toll. (Though they seem to finally be mostly healthy and rounding into form at just the right time.)

South Carolina has those factors too, plus a bench full of scorers.

Against South Florida, only two players, Boston and Cooke, played more than 24 minutes. South Florida, meanwhile, had five players who played 24 minutes or more.

That means even if you lock down Boston and Cooke, South Carolina can and will rush fresh, talented bodies at you all game long.

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