

Growing The Game

An Interview with Dawn Staley, Head Coach, Women's Basketball, University of South Carolina

EDITORS' NOTE *Catapulting South Carolina into the national spotlight when she was hired in May 2008, Dawn Staley has made the Gamecocks a mainstay in the battle for SEC and national championships. Under her leadership, the Gamecocks have reached many firsts – National Championships, NCAA Final Fours, #1 rankings, SEC regular-season and tournament titles, SEC Players of the Year, National Players of the Year, WNBA #1 Draft picks, an undefeated regular season, and*



Dawn Staley

#1 recruiting classes – to name the most notable. While her coaching career is in full bloom, Staley is still recognized for her body of work as one of the most decorated participants in United States women's basketball history. The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame solidified that legacy with her enshrinement as part of the Class of 2013. The Phoenix Club of Philadelphia established the Dawn Staley Award recognizing the nation's top guard in women's Division I basketball in 2013 as well. Staley was inducted into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame as part of the Class of 2012 and was one of the final nominees for induction to the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame the same year. Also a force in USA Basketball, Staley was named the U.S. Women's National Team head coach for 2017-21, leading the U.S. to 2018 FIBA World Cup gold to earn USA Basketball National Coach of the Year honors that year, adding gold medals at the 2019 and 2021 FIBA AmeriCups and stretching the U.S. Olympic gold medal streak to seven straight at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, for which she again earned Coach of the Year honors. Prior to that appointment, Staley led three other U.S. teams to gold medals – 2015 FIBA U19 World Championships, 2014 FIBA U18 Americas Championship, 2007 Pan Am Games – and served as an assistant on the Senior National Team 2006-08 and again 2014-16, during which the U.S. claimed gold in the 2014 FIBA World Championship and the 2008 and 2016 Olympics.

At the helm of the Gamecocks over the last 16 seasons, Staley has been named National Coach of the Year five times (2014, 2020, 2022, 2023, 2024) with her 2020 unanimous selection making her the first former Naismith Player of the Year to earn the Naismith Coach of the Year award. In 2024, she became the first men's or women's basketball coach to win that award in three consecutive seasons. She is a seven-time SEC Coach of the Year

and was the 2012 BCA Female Coach of the Year. She is the only Gamecock basketball coach – men's or women's – to amass 300 victories at South Carolina and became the fastest coach to 200 wins in program history, needing just 277 games at South Carolina to reach the plateau. She is the program's all-time winningest coach (440) with a program-record 13 postseason appearances and is the only Black head coach in men's or women's basketball to win multiple national championships. In the vaunted SEC, Staley's 199 league wins are the

most among active league coaches and third all-time. Prior to taking the helm of the Gamecocks on May 10, 2008, Staley made her coaching debut at Temple, helping the Owls reach the postseason seven times in her eight seasons on the bench, including six NCAA Tournament appearances.

As a player, Staley's success came early in her career, beginning with being named USA Today's National High School Player of the Year in 1988 as a senior at Dobbins Tech. She went on to a four-year career at the University of Virginia that featured three trips to the NCAA Final Four, including a

championship game appearance in 1991 after which she was named Most Outstanding Player. A two-time National Player of the Year (1991, 1992) and three-time Kodak All-American (1990, 1991, 1992), Staley was the ACC Player of the Year in 1991 and 1992 and the league's Rookie of the Year in 1989. Finishing her career as the only player in ACC history – male or female – to record more than 2,000 points, 700 rebounds, 700 assists and 400 steals, Staley is one of three players at Virginia to have her jersey retired. She was named to the ACC's 50th Anniversary Women's Basketball Team in 2002 and earned a spot on ESPN.com's "Top Players of the Past 25 Years." In April 2008, she was inducted into the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame. On the international scene, Staley made her first appearance in a USA Basketball uniform as a member of the 1989 Junior World Championship Team and 15 years later played her final international game after helping the organization to a 196-10 record. Olympic gold medals in 1996, 2000 and 2004 highlight her collection of 10 gold medals and one bronze on the world stage. Staley was also on two FIBA World Championship gold-medal teams (1998, 2002). Twice named USA Basketball's Female Athlete of the Year (1994,



Dawn Staley clips the final strands of the net after leading South Carolina to its third National Championship on April 7, 2024, in Cleveland, Ohio



Dawn Staley gives instructions to starting guards Te-Hina Paopao (left) and Raven Johnson (right) during a tight victory at #24 North Carolina early in the season

2004), Staley counts carrying the U.S. flag in front of the United States delegation in the 2004 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony among her most gratifying moments on the international stage.

Following the 1996 Olympic Games, Staley joined the Richmond Rage of the ABL, one of two women's basketball professional leagues started in the wake of USA Basketball's success on the world

stage. After two all-star seasons with the organization, she switched leagues, signing with the WNBA's Charlotte Sting in 1999. Including the 2005 and 2006 seasons with the Houston Comets, Staley played in the WNBA All-Star game five times and was the first player in league history to represent both the East and West teams during her career. A member of the WNBA's All-Decade Team,

as selected by a panel of national and WNBA-market media as well as the league's players and coaches, Staley twice earned the Kim Perrot Sportsmanship Award (1999, 2006) and won the WNBA Entrepreneurial Spirit Award in 1999.

Following her retirement from the league, the WNBA began awarding the Dawn Staley Community Leadership Award in 2007, honoring the player who best exemplifies the characteristics of a leader in the community in which she works or lives. In July 2013, Staley founded INNERSOLE, which aims to provide new sneakers to children who are homeless and children who are in need. Remembering the feeling of confidence and pride she felt as a child whenever she wore new sneakers, Staley initially launched the organization via social media, and her broad network of friends, fans and colleagues immediately leapt into action. Shoes poured in from all around the country, and a movement was born. Local and national organizations have recognized Staley's commitment to giving back, most recently with the 2020 Jefferson Award for Outstanding Public Service, The Columbia Chamber naming her its 2017 Ambassador of the Year and, in 2013, then-South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley tabbed Staley to receive the Order of the Palmetto, the highest civilian honor from the governor bestowed on those who have displayed significant achievement and service to the state. Staley has twice been presented the Wanamaker Award (1997, 2005), presented annually to the athlete, team or organization that has done the most to reflect credit upon Philadelphia and to the team or sport in which he/she excels. She is the only individual woman to ever win the award and joins Joe Frazier and Steve Carlton as the only individuals to capture the honor twice. In 2007, the Rotary Club of Tulsa named Staley its female recipient of the Henry P. Iba Citizenship Award, which is presented annually to the male and female athlete who has excelled in both their sport and their service to others.

Staley was honored by the University of Virginia Women's Center in 2006 with the Center's Distinguished Alumna Award, which honors a female graduate of the University who has demonstrated excellence, leadership and extraordinary commitment to her field and who has used her talents as a positive force for change. The University further recognized Staley's standing in the community when it asked her to give the valedictory address at the 2009 Valedictory Exercises.

Following South Carolina's 2017 National Championship, both of Staley's hometowns renamed streets in her honor with Columbia Mayor Steven K. Benjamin renaming Lincoln Street from College Street to Blossom Street, Dawn Staley Way, which leads directly to the Gamecocks' homecourt, Colonial Life Arena, in April 2017. In December 2017, the City of Philadelphia named the two-block stretch of Diamond Street from 23rd to 25th Street, which was the path from Staley's house in the Raymond Rosen Projects to the Moylan (now Hank Gathers) Recreational Center where she began her basketball career, Dawn Staley Lane. In 2023, the City of Columbia announced that a statue of Staley would be created and is expected to be installed in Fall 2024 across from the South Carolina State House.



Did you know early on that you would spend your career in the game of basketball?

I didn't think about it as a career, since I was so focused on being a player and just thought about playing. At that time, there was not an outlet to play professionally that I knew about and when you are young, you think that you will be able to play forever so you don't focus on what comes next.

When I became a coach, I think I was prepared, having come from North Philadelphia which helped shape me, and from all my years as a player. I grew up in a disciplined household, and I have never been afraid of working hard. I think it is pretty simple and straightforward. Sometimes people make things difficult and complicated, but if you are consistent, focus on what makes you successful, take notes along the way, and work on the things that you need to improve, good things happen.

When you are recruiting players, while you are looking for the best talent, how important is personality and character?

It is super important. I look at the relationship that they have with their parents. That is a prerequisite for me. If they do not have a strong relationship with their parents, that is a tell-tale sign.

What are your views on the state of college sports today, especially with the transfer portal and players moving from school to school?

The transfer portal is making college basketball transactional, and I have not had to go there. I probably never will because that is my standard and my moral compass. I treat players coming and going as a relationship – no matter how long I have a player, it will always be a relationship.

Even after my players are done with their college careers, I keep caring for them and wanting the best for them. I have strong relationships with my players, whether they transfer to our school or transfer out to another school. Many players transfer because of playing time, and I am fine with that. You have to do what is best for you, and young people are going to do what is best for them. I understand that, so I don't get too high with the highs or too low with the lows.

Are you surprised to see the way women's college basketball has grown and what the game has become?

I did not see it coming because I think that women's basketball has been held back. When I played at the University of Virginia, we had many fans attend our games, so I didn't know at that time what I didn't know. We thought everything was good and we were getting opportunities and that we were being loved on. There was an appearance that we should be appreciative of what we were getting. Then you grow up in the game and you find out that there was some intentionality to holding our game back.

Today, the women's game is bursting at the seams, and you have to try to keep up – it is supply and demand. I hope that our game continues to move in the right direction, but make no mistake of the fact that the playing field is far from even. The playing field will not be even for a long time, but it does feel better. There is no way to deny the strength and power of women's basketball any longer.

How do you describe your coaching style, and do you enjoy the recruiting process?

I am probably a little Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I give the pertinent emotion that is needed – if someone turns the ball over in practice, I will go off for a second; and when someone makes an incredible pass or dives for a loose ball, I am their biggest cheerleader. It happens in a matter of seconds.

I am not sure who would say recruiting is fun. I do enjoy the competitive nature of recruiting and the challenge of it, but it is not something that I will miss when I hang my shoes up. I will miss coaching and I will miss the game, but I will not miss the recruiting process.

Do you miss being a player?

I never missed playing from the minute I stopped playing, because I played one year longer than I should have. I got it all out of my



Dawn Staley talks to her team during a timeout of its SEC win over Mississippi State on January 7, 2024 (top); Dawn Staley cheers on her team in the NCAA Sweet 16 against Indiana (above)



Dawn Staley meets with as many fans as possible after every home game at Colonial Life Arena, some waiting up to 30 minutes for her to reach them

system. I am good. I love what I am doing, and I love being a dream merchant for young people. I love seeing when a player gets it and plays up to their standards, and I love the challenge of helping a player reach their potential when they are not doing so. I enjoy the dynamics of working with and teaching young people.

Will you reflect on your feelings about this past season and winning another National Championship?

I enjoyed this season. My players made me enjoy it. Our players had no care in the world and just played. We took on all the pressure as coaches, and that is how I want it to be.

You mentioned hanging up your shoes. Is that time still a long way off?

No. I am not a coach that is going to still be there when I am 70 years old.

How has faith played a role in your life?

My mother “worked in a vineyard” when it came to church so I was forced into church. I was the youngest in the family, and she wasn’t going to leave me alone all-day on Sundays when she went to church. A good thing about having to go with her to church all day was that I was able to get anything I wanted – I hit her pockets a lot. There were three services each Sunday, and between every service I would ask her for money to get some candy, so I was good for the whole week.

My mother was a believer until the day she died, and she set an example for me as a youngster which has stayed with me for my entire life. I have a true understanding of what God can do. As I got older and read scripture, it allowed me to realize that I can’t explain what my career has been. Yes, I work hard, but a lot of people work hard. People will say that God doesn’t choose who gets gifts, but I think he does. I am truly thankful for what I have received in my life. I am not someone who wants to talk about religion because I do not want to offend anybody or throw my religion on other people, but I really can’t help it because my cup runneth over. When I do talk about my faith, I do not mean to be offensive to anybody by saying that I am blessed.

Will you discuss your relationship with your mother?

My mother was my role model. I am a simple person, and I lead a comfortable, simple life. Sometimes basketball complicates it, but I am fine with that because I know that it doesn’t take much for me to be happy. I am good being at home and just chilling watching television. I get pleasure out of washing clothes. I wish I could iron my sheets every weekend, but I really don’t have enough time. My mother grew up ironing our sheets in the house, and when I do get a chance and have the time in the offseason, I do it because it makes me think of her. I am more like my mother than anything, and I actually didn’t like my mother growing up because she was such a disciplinarian and such a stickler for the way she needed things to be done. And now I am her – I am fully her.

She was able to see us win our first National Championship, and she passed away that year. She used to come to the games, and when she would see me get on the officials, she would run down from her seat to yell at me for yelling at the officials. Now she is just sending down the blessings.

Are you able to turn off the game and just have Dawn Staley time?

I protect my peace. I would not have been able to do it as long as I have without being able to protect my peace. I have a great staff who are always thinking about basketball, so when I take off for a few hours I know someone is working. It is a team effort. ●