

SPORTS



A CHAMPION IS CROWNED

For coverage of the NCAA men's basketball championship game, visit usatoday.com/sports. Also, check out **Sports Extra**, our subscriber-exclusive, eNewspaper.

WOMEN'S COLLEGE BASKETBALL NCAA CHAMPIONSHIP



South Carolina's Raven Johnson (25) attempts a shot while being guarded by UConn's Sarah Strong (21) in the first quarter of the championship game of the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament on Sunday at Amalie Arena in Tampa.

MADDIE MEYER/GETTY IMAGES

NO REPEAT FOR GAMECOCKS

South Carolina's bad offense prevents chance to repeat as NCAA champion

Lulu Kesin

Greenville News

USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

TAMPA, Fla. — What could have been a repeat as national champions was instead just a repeat of bad basketball.

South Carolina women's basketball started the season struggling to score and despite all the triumphs between Nov. 4 and April 6, the No. 1 Gamecocks (35-3) just couldn't score enough to finish the season with another title.

In every way, No. 2 UConn dominat-

"We were really trying to put the ball in the basket, lots of contact, but we can't sit here and make excuses."

Chloe Kitts

South Carolina junior forward

ed, and just like their 29-point victory in Colonial Life Arena on Feb. 16, the Huskies (37-3) had complete control in

the 82-59 win in the NCAA championship at Amalie Arena on Sunday.

A critical element to keeping up with a team that was red hot throughout the NCAA tournament was to limit turnovers and to match their scoring. In the first 10 minutes, it looked like South Carolina could.

When the third quarter began, it felt like the life was slowly getting sucked out of the Gamecocks' fan section as the Huskies outscored South Carolina 26-16.

See TITLE GAME, Page 2C

Staley gives her view of 23-point loss to UConn

Lulu Kesin

Greenville News

USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

TAMPA, Fla. — Dawn Staley had never lost a national championship game, but that changed Sunday when South Carolina women's basketball fell 82-59 to UConn.

The Gamecocks coach made no excuses for the monstrous loss.

"We lost to a very, very good basketball team," Staley said in the post-game news conference. "They beat our ass but they didn't make us like it. There's a difference."

The No. 1 seed Gamecocks (35-4) and the No. 2 seed Huskies (37-3) traded baskets for most of the first quarter and early into the second. But UConn, which led by 10 at halftime, stepped on the gas till the very end.

South Carolina was outscored, out-hustled and dominated in the second half. Staley highlighted the fact that UConn, a strong 3-point shooting team, finished with only one made 3-pointer in the first half — a positive sign as the Huskies made 13 in their 29-point win over South Carolina in February. But the Gamecocks couldn't convert any shots of their own, shooting 21-for-61 overall (34.4%).

"I hope they're crying," Staley said. "I hope they're boo-hooing because from crying they have emotion about losing, makes you work hard in the offseason."

By the start of the fourth quarter, UConn freshman Sarah Strong and veteran guard Azzi Fudd had more points combined than South Carolina did as a team. Each finished with 24 points.

Sophomore guard Tessa Johnson and freshman forward Joyce Edwards each scored 10 points, but no other South Carolina player finished with more than nine.

See STALEY, Page 2C



South Carolina head coach Dawn Staley reacts during the first half of Sunday's championship game against UConn at Amalie Arena in Tampa. NATHAN RAY SEEBECK/IMAGN IMAGES

COLLEGE BASEBALL

Clemson's home run potential sparks sweep of Cal

Derrian Carter

Greenville News

USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

Clemson baseball captured its fourth straight ACC series during the weekend.

The No. 7 Tigers swept Cal this weekend in their three-game series at Stu Gordon Stadium in Berkeley, California. They took Game 1 after a late-inning comeback and earned a run-rule victory Saturday after scoring 13 runs in the first two innings.

Clemson (30-5, 9-3 ACC) held on to escape the Golden Bears (16-15, 6-9) in the finale, winning 4-3, after its bullpen held Cal scoreless for 3½ innings.

Here's what we learned about Clem-

son's sixth series win this season.

Clemson baseball's home-run potential finally erupts vs Cal

Clemson hit 109 home runs in 2024. It lost 72.5% of that production, including four of its top five home run hitters, and their departure has been felt this season.

In conference series, the Tigers hit two home runs vs. Notre Dame, none against Wake Forest and four vs. Georgia Tech. They entered this series against Cal with 32 home runs, ranking in the bottom half of ACC teams.

See BASEBALL, Page 2C



Clemson sophomore Collin Priest (99) bats against Winthrop University during the bottom of the second inning on Feb. 25 at Doug Kingsmore Stadium in Clemson. KEN RUINARD / STAFF

ON THE AIR**TUESDAY TELEVISION****COLLEGE BASEBALL**

7 p.m. ESPN2 – Florida State at Florida
da

SEC – Arkansas State at Arkansas

8 p.m. ACC – Kentucky at Louisville

COLLEGE SOFTBALL

6 p.m. ACC – Charlotte at Virginia
Tech

MLB

4 p.m. MLB – Chicago White Sox at
Cleveland

7 p.m. FDSNSO, TBS – Philadelphia at
Atlanta

10 p.m. MLB – San Diego at Athletics

MEN'S SOCCER

9 p.m. FS1 – L.A. Galaxy at Tigres
UANL

10 p.m. FS2 – Argentina at Canada

11:30 p.m. FS1 – América at Cruz Azul

NBA

7 p.m. FDSNE – Memphis at Charlotte
7:30 p.m. TNT – Boston at New York
10 p.m. TNT – Golden State at Phoenix

NBA G LEAGUE

8 p.m. ESPNU – Finals Game 1

NHL

7 p.m. ESPN – Toronto at Florida

9:30 p.m. ESPN – Vegas at Colorado

WOMEN'S HOCKEY

5 a.m. (Wed.) NHL – IIHF: Germany vs.
Sweden

WOMEN'S SOCCER

1 p.m. CBSSN – Portugal at Spain

10:30 p.m. TBS – Brazil at United
States

Note: Live events only. Subject to
schedule changes and local black-
outs. jip - joined in progress.

Staley

Continued from Page 1C

"It's not heartbreaking because you can see it happening in real time," Staley said. "You can understand why you got beat. When you have that understanding, you figure out how to get better, you start thinking about in real time what we need if put in this situation again to be better and have a different outcome."

UConn won its first national title since 2016, stopping Staley and South Carolina from winning its third in four years and second in a row.

Staley loses seniors Te-Hina Paopao, Bree Hall, Sania Feagin and potentially Raven Johnson next season. She was asked what she wanted her team to take away from the blowout.

"Makes you look at it and really analyze what the separation is from their program and our program and how we close the gap with that," she said. "They're very talented and I think they got a great experience of playing at this level that I hope they have a desire to get back here and do all the things it takes to play in the national championship game and to deliver the blows that's needed to win."



South Carolina head coach Dawn Staley hugs guard Bree Hall (23) during the second half of the championship game of the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament on Sunday at Amalie Arena in Tampa. NATHAN RAY SEEBECK/IMAGN IMAGES

South Carolina's seniors exit with heads held high

Lulu Kesin

Greenville News

USA TODAY

TAMPA, Fla. — The game was out of reach, so coach Dawn Staley pulled South Carolina women's basketball's upperclassmen out of the game together.

One last time.

Tears were rolling down the face of guard Bree Hall as the clock wound down, but when she walked onto the podium in the basement of Amalie Arena after ending her college career with a 23-point loss, her smile had wiped her eyes dry.

Hall's focus wasn't on the fact the No. 1 Gamecocks (35-4) lost 82-59 to No. 2 UConn. She spoke openly about how there's a lot more to Sunday.

"I'm so appreciative of everything that this program has done for me," Hall said. "Coach has put me in a great position. I've won two national championships. It's upsetting, of course, to lose and you're right there. But, I mean, I can't express how appreciative I am of this program, and I just had such a great experience here."

Hall, Sania Feagin and Raven Johnson have won two national championships. They have never not advanced to the Final Four, and they won the SEC tournament championship in three of their four seasons with the program.

Hall said she's probably not as upset as people would expect and was then asked if that was a result of just overwhelming gratitude or acceptance that UConn was the better team on Sunday.

"A little bit of both," Hall said. "(UConn) did their thing, gotta give

"I'm so appreciative of everything that this program has done for me. Coach has put me in a great position. I've won two national championships. It's upsetting, of course, to lose and you're right there. But, I mean, I can't express how appreciative I am of this program, and I just had such a great experience here."

Bree Hall

South Carolina guard

them their credit. But to sit here and be so upset about something like this when I've had such an incredible four years, made history at the program, it's just no reason to be super, super duper upset. Of course it hurts. Of course I'm competitive. Of course I want to win. That's a no-brainer. But I can't express how appreciative I am of this program."

Staley has won three NCAA championships, but only one group has won a national championship twice with Staley – not even iconic players like A'ja Wilson and Aliyah Boston were able to do that. This group finished with a 144-7 record at South Carolina. The total wins and the .954 winning percentage are the best four-year marks in program history.

"They're the winningest class over the four-year period," Staley said. "There's nothing to hang their heads about. I made sure I told them that because basketball, if you play it long enough, you're going to have some heartbreaks. If you play it long enough, you're going to reach the mountain tops for the fortunate ones, and we've been very fortunate."

Johnson tore her left ACL early into her freshman season, which resulted in her taking a redshirt medical year. She has one year of eligibility left if she decides to take it. Johnson said Sunday she has made a decision but can't announce it yet.

Transfer guard Te-Hina Paopao secured two national tournament appearances, two SEC tournament championship wins and one NCAA championship in her two seasons with the program.

Hall, Feagin and Paopao are all expected to announce they will declare for the WNBA draft on April 14.

"They're just great human beings," Staley said. "They've allowed me to coach them being my uncensored self. Not a lot of coaches are able to just be who they are. I could have real conversations with them that maybe would probably hurt other people's feelings, and they allow me to be me because they know I'm just coming to them from a place of wanting them to get better, wanting them to continue their winning ways and also preparing them for the next level."

Lulu Kesin covers South Carolina athletics for The Greenville News and the USA TODAY Network. Email her at lkesin@gannett.com and follow her on X, formerly known as Twitter, @Luluke-sin

Title game

Continued from Page 1C

"They snatched our souls," point guard Raven Johnson said.

While UConn's defense forced uncomfortable shots, the Gamecocks couldn't seemingly convert with simple basketball either. They finished the game 10-of-23 on layups, an area so critical to keeping up with a team capable of putting on an offensive clinic.

South Carolina shot 34% from the field, converting just 21 of 61 shots.

"Nothing was falling for us," junior forward Chloe Kitts said. "We were really trying to put the ball in the basket, lots of contact, but we can't sit here and make excuses. We could have done bet-

ter."

In the third quarter, MiLaysia Fulwiley scored on a layup, blocked a shot, then got a steal and then an assist to cut the Gamecocks' deficit to 11. UConn coach Geno Auriemma called timeout. Instead of creating more momentum after the break, South Carolina let a perfectly run offensive set result in a 3-pointer by Azzi Fudd.

It was an early dagger, an extra punch – just better offense at the perfect time – something that happened in Round 1 between the two teams as well. South Carolina was down, caught fire and UConn zapped all momentum.

Throughout the NCAA tournament, South Carolina struggled to score but because of its experience, effort and defense, made its way to the Final Four. Against Texas on Friday, it seemed like

the offensive flow had returned, but despite positive ball movement against UConn, shots weren't made.

Coach Dawn Staley gave ample credit to UConn and the "masterful" win but felt so much of the offensive was self-inflicted. The defense held the Huskies to one 3-pointer in the first half – consider that UConn shoots 37.7% from behind the arc and made 13 in the regular-season matchup with the Gamecocks – but Fudd's 3-pointer came at an inopportune time.

South Carolina trailed by just seven with less than a minute left till halftime, despite a 4-minute, 46-second scoring drought in the second quarter. UConn hadn't scored in over two minutes either but with nine seconds left, Ashlynn Shade nailed a 3-pointer to make it a 10-point game.

"I thought our game plan was good," Staley said. "You give yourself a chance if you play the two-(point) game with UConn. The three-(pointer) is the separation, but we couldn't get our two game going, we couldn't make easy layups ... they got a lot of two points."

Both teams made only four 3-pointers but UConn had 1.2 points per possession and 18 assists compared to .937 and nine from South Carolina.

"In the third quarter, it just started getting away from us," Kitts said. "By the fourth quarter, it was just like 'shoot', it kind of just hit us," Kitts said.

Lulu Kesin covers South Carolina athletics for The Greenville News and the USA TODAY Network. Email her at lkesin@gannett.com and follow her on X, formerly known as Twitter, @Luluke-sin

Baseball

Continued from Page 1C

Clemson found its slugging on the West Coast, crushing six homers. Dominic Listi (Indiana State transfer), Collin Priest (Michigan) and Josh Paine (Cal Baptist) were among six batters who homered in the three-game set. It hopes to carry over its slugging when it returns to Doug Kingsmore Stadium.

"We've felt like that's been coming.

We've needed that," Clemson coach Erik Bakich said Saturday. "We've hit some

balls and just haven't really had that explosion like that."

Clemson baseball's transfer players show out vs Cal

Speaking of transfers, Clemson's portal additions provided massive offensive contributions over the weekend. Listi went 2-for-5 with three RBIs Friday, including a home run and then a two-out, two-run double that ignited a four-run seventh inning that helped Clemson take Game 1.

On Saturday, Priest was 3-for-4 with a home run and five RBIs. Paine

joined in to get 2-for-4 with two runs and a first-inning grand slam. Purdue transfer Luke Gaffney had two RBIs on Sunday, including a go-ahead sacrifice fly in the seventh; he has logged an RBI in three of his past four games.

Clemson baseball sits atop ACC standings

With No. 4 Florida State's series loss to No. 23 Wake Forest this weekend, Clemson is the only ACC team not to lose a conference series this season. The Tigers have faced adversity but have found ways to win, including en-

gineering comeback wins in finales against Wake Forest and Georgia Tech to win both series.

Clemson has concerns about starting pitching and consistent hitting, but when it's time to deliver, the Tigers have made the necessary plays to come out on top. It looks to further cement itself as an NCAA regional host for the third straight season.

Derrian Carter covers Clemson athletics for The Greenville News and the USA TODAY Network. Email him at dcarter@gannett.com and follow him on X, formerly known as Twitter, @DerrianCarter00