

SPORTS



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Joyce Edwards reacts during a game on Jan. 25 in Columbia. JACOB KUPFERMAN/GETTY IMAGES

Edwards found her voice on run back to Final Four

Lulu Kesin
Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

PHOENIX – To know what South Carolina women's basketball star forward Joyce Edwards is thinking, look at her face.

"We like to joke and say that anything she feels you'll see it on her face before it comes out of her mouth, it's just always been like that," said sophomore forward Adhel Tac.

Edwards feels many things on the court but

putting those thoughts into words isn't her typical first course of action.

"It doesn't make me uncomfortable, it's just a little bit of an inconvenience in my opinion," Edwards said.

Edwards helped lead the No. 1 seed Gamecocks (35-3) back to the Final Four where they will face No. 1 overall seed UConn (38-0) on April 3 (7 p.m. ET, ESPN).

The 6-foot-3 forward came off the bench and

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South Carolina coach Dawn Staley celebrates after defeating TCU in the Elite Eight on March 30 in Sacramento, California. THIEN-AN TRUONG/GETTY IMAGES

STALEY'S LEGACY

With 4th title, South Carolina women's coach can move up among the greats

Lulu Kesin
Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

PHOENIX – When Raven Johnson saw Chloe Kitts tear her ACL on a rebound in practice in October, she wasn't too sure what this season would hold.

"Is this team gonna be the same? Like, she's a big key to this team," Johnson remembers thinking.

But South Carolina women's basketball is back in familiar territory: competing in a Final Four

with a trip to the national championship on the line.

The No. 1 seed Gamecocks (35-3) take on the reigning champions, No. 1 overall seed UConn (38-0) on April 3 in Phoenix (7 p.m. ET, ESPN).

There's a multitude of reasons why South Carolina's tradition of net-cutting lived on for a sixth consecutive March. But this year more than most showed Dawn Staley's impact as one of the top coaches in women's college basketball history.

"Everybody just stayed together and trusted Coach's process," Johnson said. "It's been a long run, we deserve this."

How Staley got South Carolina to sixth straight Final Four

South Carolina had six of 12 players go down for various injuries or illnesses this season, forcing Staley to use eight different starting lineups.

In four of the last five trips to the Final Four, she used two or three different lineups.

Since claiming her first SEC regular-season title in 2014, Staley has won nine more, securing a 10th this season.

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SOUTH CAROLINA FOOTBALL

Why Beamer signed Giwa, who never played football

Derrian Carter
Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina football coach Shane Beamer said he didn't know much about Neff Giwa but was blown away when he first saw the 6-foot-8, 295-pound Irish rugby player at the team's practice on March 19.

"You look over there on the sideline, you're like, 'Who the heck is that?'" Beamer said March 31 after South Carolina's 10th spring practice.

Giwa, a three-star recruit in the 247Sports Composite who has never played football, signed with the Game-

cocks on March 29 after visiting South Carolina again on March 23.

He chose Beamer's program over Miami, Georgia, Clemson, Tennessee, Michigan State, North Carolina, SMU and James Madison.

The Athletic reported on March 24 that South Carolina wanted to give Giwa a "huge NIL deal," so he would commit earlier and cancel his visit to Miami. Beamer said this wasn't true.

"We were trying to keep him from someone else because he sat in my office and he told me how much he loves this place, and he told me that from the

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Neff Giwa, a 6-foot-7 rugby player from Ireland who will play offensive line at South Carolina. 247SPORTS

SPORTS ON TV FRIDAY, APRIL 3 (ALL TIMES EASTERN)

AUTO RACING

12:05 p.m.

FS2 — NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series, Black's Tire 200, Qualifying, Rockingham, N.C.

4:30 p.m.

FS1 — NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series, Black's Tire 200, Rockingham, N.C.

COLLEGE BASEBALL

5:30 p.m.

SECN — LSU at Tennessee

6 p.m.

ACCN — Louisville at Duke

COLLEGE BASKETBALL (MEN'S)

3:30 p.m.

CBSSN — NABC-Reese's Division I All-Star Game, Indianapolis

COLLEGE BASKETBALL (WOMEN'S)

7 p.m.

ESPN — NCAA Tournament, Final Four, South Carolina vs. UConn, Phoenix

9:30 p.m.

ESPN — NCAA Tournament, Final Four, Texas vs. UCLA, Phoenix

COLLEGE GYMNASTICS (MEN'S)

8 p.m.

BTN — Big Ten Championships, Lincoln, Neb.

COLLEGE LACROSSE (WOMEN'S)

4 p.m.

ACCN — North Carolina at Virginia

COLLEGE SOFTBALL

6 p.m.

BTN — Rutgers at Nebraska

7 p.m.

FS1 — BYU at Texas Tech

8:30 p.m.

SECN — Texas at Alabama

GOLF

4 p.m.

GOLF — PGA Tour, Valero Texas Open, Second Round, San Antonio, Texas

7 p.m.

GOLF — LPGA Tour/LET, Aramco Championship, Second Round, Las Vegas

HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL (BOYS)

2 p.m.

ESPN2 — Chipotle Nationals, Semifinals, Teams TBD, Fishers, Ind.

4 p.m.

ESPN2 — Chipotle Nationals, Semifinals, Teams TBD, Fishers, Ind.

HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL (GIRLS)

10 a.m.

ESPN2 — Chipotle Nationals, Semifinals,

Teams TBD, Fishers, Ind.

12 p.m.

ESPN2 — Chipotle Nationals, Semifinals, Teams TBD, Fishers, Ind.

HORSE RACING

1 p.m.

FS2 — America's Day at the Races

MLB BASEBALL

1:35 p.m.

MLBN — Miami at N.Y. Yankees

4 p.m.

ESPN UNLIMITED — Chicago Cubs at Cleveland

4:30 p.m.

MLBN — Cincinnati at Texas

7:45 p.m.

APPLE TV — Milwaukee at Kansas City

9:30 p.m.

MLBN — Seattle at L.A. Angels

9:45 p.m.

APPLE TV — Atlanta at Arizona

NBA BASKETBALL

7 p.m.

ESPNU — G League, Playoffs, Eastern Conference, Semis, Motor City at Osceola

7:30 p.m.

NBA TV — Chicago at New York

10 p.m.

AMAZON PRIME — G League, Playoffs, Western Conference, Semifinals, Rio Grande Valley at South Bay

NBA TV — G League, Playoffs, Western Conference, Semifinals, Rip City at Stockton

NHL HOCKEY

7 p.m.

NHLN — Philadelphia at N.Y. Islanders

NWSL SOCCER (WOMEN'S)

8 p.m.

AMAZON PRIME — Angel City at Orlando

TENNIS

4 a.m.

TENNIS — Bucharest-ATP & Marrakech-ATP Quarterfinals

11 a.m. & 6 p.m.

TENNIS — WTA, Charleston Open, Quarterfinals

UFL FOOTBALL

8 p.m.

FOX — D.C. Defenders at Columbus

WNBA BASKETBALL (WOMEN'S)

3:30 p.m.

ESPN — Expansion Draft for Toronto Tempo and Portland Fire

Staley

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Her domination of the SEC in the post-Pat Summitt era at Tennessee has only gotten more difficult.

This season included a Vanderbilt program on the rise, a Texas team full of talent, star-studded LSU with former South Carolina guard MiLaysia Fulwiley, a seasoned Kentucky roster, and an Oklahoma team with the 2025 No. 1 recruit.

But only Oklahoma got the best of Staley's Gamecocks, who got revenge with a Sweet 16 win over the Sooners.

And seemingly after losing its chance to secure the No. 3 overall seed by losing to Texas in the SEC Tournament title game, this version of Staley's team has locked in.

South Carolina has outscored its four NCAA Tournament opponents by 161 points, the largest point differential in SEC history.

South Carolina is on pace for a record-setting offensive season, averaging 87.1 points, which would beat the program record of 85.4. That was set in 2023-24, the last group to win a title with Staley.

Geno Auriemma took UConn to a record-setting 14 straight Final Fours from 2008-22, with Staley's streak of six the second longest active streak.

Last season featured Staley's first national title loss, losing to Auriemma and snapping her 3-0 streak in the final game of the season.

Now she's two wins shy of her fourth



South Carolina coach Dawn Staley celebrates following the Gamecocks' win against USC Trojans on March 23 in Columbia. JEFF BLAKE/IMAGN IMAGES

title.

Where Staley's fourth national championship would put her

Staley was 15 when Auriemma was in his first season with UConn in 1985-86. She was 25 when he won his first title, and now he was a record 12.

Pat Summitt, who died in 2016, won eight with Tennessee, sitting at second behind Auriemma.

Kim Mulkey is alone in third with four, three from her time at Baylor and her most recent in 2023 at LSU.

Staley, 55, is tied with Tara VanDerveer, who won three with Stanford.

Staley could win her third title in five

seasons, still behind Summitt's three straight and Auriemma's four straight.

Staley's first came in 2017, so another would tie her with Summitt for four in a 10-season span. Auriemma won six across 10 seasons.

VanDerveer retired in 2024. Linda Sharp, who won two with Southern Cal, and Muffet McGraw, who won two, with Notre Dame also retired. No other active coach has more than one title.

The last time an active coach not named Staley, Mulkey or Auriemma won a national championship was Brenda Frese in 2006 with Maryland.

2026 Women's NCAA Tournament, Final Four

Edwards

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quietly thrived for South Carolina coach Dawn Staley as a freshman last year.

She had the luxury of Sania Feagin being comfortable talking, with Chloe Kitts chiming in when necessary.

So when Feagin graduated into the WNBA, it was Kitts' turn. Her voice was the loudest all summer, but she tore her ACL in practice before the season started, meaning she would miss the season.

That left Edwards all alone in the frontcourt with senior Maryam Dauda, who averaged 6.4 minutes last year, Tac, who averaged 3.8, and Madina Okot, a transfer center in just her second season of basketball in the United States.

Edwards had to grow up quickly this season, finding a way to vocalize what needs to happen.

That responsibility she didn't come to South Carolina seeking.

"I definitely think she didn't want it. She just wants to play basketball, just

get out there and do her thing," Tac said.

"I mean, they're kind of right. I do just want to ball, but I feel like at the end of the day, I have good stuff to say and have to say it to help the team," said Edwards, whose scoring average is up to 19.7 points compared to 12.7 last season.

How Joyce Edwards impressed Dawn Staley

Since middle school, Edwards said she had trouble conveying what she meant.

"I come from a very blunt, honest family, and you can't be like that to everybody," she said.

She had no choice but to learn how and what to say with Okot, Dauda, Tac, and 18-year old Alicia Tournebize, who joined the team from France in January, looking at her for guidance.

"I had to step into a leadership role and I'm not really necessarily that vocal on the court," Edwards said. "I feel like I just read off of people. It's kind of hard for me to say things sometimes, and I don't know what people need to hear,

but just finding that balance of being vocal, still just playing basketball and not being too controlling over other people."

In some ways it was trial by fire. Kitts was just the first player to go down, with Edwards losing six other teammates for various games along the way.

"She's growing up in the fact that you can't not talk, because a lot of the stuff we do is through you," Tac said. "Our energy starts with you. Coach has told her and we've told her that she's an anchor for us. When she's good, we're good when she's not, we're not.

"The information that comes out of her mouth is very valuable and she recognized that. She's taken such a huge leap."

Transfer Ta'Niya Latson is just playing one season together with Edwards at South Carolina, but they played AAU together.

"She's having a breakout year, and I'm so proud of her, just to see her flourish every step, it's been beautiful to see," Latson said. "Her voice is very powerful. So whatever she says that the locker

room is listening, and it's a lot of pressure for a young kid to have that, but I feel like she carries it well and she's doing her best."

When Edwards is screening off the ball, making short jumpers or running the floor in transition, the Gamecocks are good. When doing that plus explaining what defensive looks she recognizes during a timeout, and identifying and vocalizing what is and isn't working, they're great.

"Joyce's progress from Year 1 to Year 2 has been outstanding," Staley said. "I think that progress got sped up a little bit more because of Chloe went down early in the season, and I think Joyce just took it upon herself to want to win. She studies the game. She knows what things she needs to correct from last season to this season, and she's doing that in real time."

Lulu Kesin covers South Carolina athletics for *The Greenville News* and the *USA TODAY Network*. Email her at LKesin@usatodayco.com. Follow her on X @Lulukesin and Bluesky @bylulukesin.bsky.social

Since 2022-23, South Carolina's lost eight games to five coaches. Three of the five were to Close, Schaefer and Auriemma.

Where Staley ranks among coaches with most NCAA women's basketball championships

- Geno Auriemma, UConn (12)
- Pat Summitt, Tennessee (8)
- Kim Mulkey, Baylor and LSU (4)
- Dawn Staley, South Carolina (3)
- Tara VanDerveer, Stanford (3)
- Linda Sharp, Southern Cal (2)
- Muffet McGraw, Notre Dame (2)

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Football

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first time he was here, how at home he felt," Beamer said. "... This wasn't just a 'Hey, we got a bunch of money left over. Let's just throw it all at the Irish soccer player.'"

Brandon Collier, the founder and CEO of PPI recruits, which is focused on international recruiting for football, helped Giwa visit South Carolina. He supported Beamer's statement, too.

"Neff turned down significantly more from other contenders to sign at South Carolina because of the time he had with Coach Beamer and Coach Klemm

(OL coach Randy Clements), nothing about money was his reason for choosing the gamecocks.... If yall only knew this wasn't even in the ball park of some others," Collier posted March 31 on X.

Beamer said another reason South Carolina pursued Giwa is because the Gamecocks wanted to sign five offensive linemen in the 2026 cycle. They only secured three: Darius Gray (four star), Zyon Guiles (four star) and Anthony Baxter (three star).

Beamer anticipates Giwa will arrive at South Carolina when summer school starts, which is May 26.

Why Neff Giwa will start at offensive lineman at South Carolina

Beamer said Collier thought Giwa could be a tight end or defensive tackle when he first started training but figured offensive tackle would be his likeliest fit. Beamer agreed based on Giwa's body type and growth potential.

South Carolina also has a need at tackle with NC State transfer Jacarius Peak out for the spring with an injury he sustained playing basketball in February and two-year starter Josiah Thompson likely out for the entire 2026 season because of an injury.

Beamer said Giwa could be used as a tight end, too, but will start on the offensive line.

"When you turn on the rugby tape, you look at it and say, 'Holy smokes,'" Beamer said, "Instead of carrying this

rugby ball, let's just toss a football in his hands and let somebody try and tackle him. Once we get him here, we'll see, but that's the plan right now, and we'll see how the development goes over the summer."

Growing up, Giwa played for Cashel Rugby Club near his hometown of Tipperary, Ireland. He later represented Munster Rugby and was selected to the Ireland U18 Clubs and Schools squad for 2022.

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