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South Carolina coach Dawn Staley greets guard Raven Johnson (25) coming out of the game against Southern California on March 23 at Colonial Life Arena in Columbia. KEN RUINARD / USA TODAY NETWORK SOUTH CAROLINA

How Makeer helped slow Southern Cal star Davidson

Lulu Kesin
Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK - SOUTH CAROLINA

COLUMBIA — To advance to the Sweet 16 of the Women's NCAA Tournament, South Carolina women's basketball had to stop Southern Cal freshman phenom Jazzy Davidson.

The No. 1 recruit from the Class of 2025 was coming off a 31-point night in the first round of March Madness. But South Carolina freshman Agot Makeer did her part to make sure Davidson didn't have any repeat success in the second round.

In the 101-61 victory for the No. 1 seed Gamecocks (33-3) on March 23, Davidson didn't score until the 6:20 mark of the second quarter. She finished with 16 points on 5-of-15 shooting, and 10 of her points came after South Carolina led by at least 30.

"I think the game plan (against) every team is to slow down their best player, especially (for) me," Makeer said. "I was motivated going in. She's my class, so just getting to play against her again was fun."

Makeer was the No. 5 overall player in the 2025 class. She scored a career-high 15 points with three steals in the first-round win over Southern, and she followed it up with 15 points again, with three assists and four steals.

South Carolina coach Dawn Staley often says she doesn't treat her freshmen like young players.

"I came here to be challenged," Makeer said. "I know there were other options, but I wanted to be coached by the best. It's hard. I struggled at times, but I feel like now I'm rising up and it's only going to make me better."

SEC Defensive Player of the Year Raven Johnson had Davidson at the start. She gave her nothing easy, with Davidson starting 0-of-2. So when Makeer checked

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South Carolina's Agot Makeer (44) goes to the basket near Southern California's Kennedy Smith (11) on March 23 at Colonial Life Arena in Columbia.

KEN RUINARD/USA TODAY NETWORK SOUTH CAROLINA

'Storybook ending'

Johnson plays final home game for South Carolina

Lulu Kesin
Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK - SOUTH CAROLINA

COLUMBIA — Raven Johnson walked off the court one last time in Colonial Life Arena clapping to the beat of the crowd chanting her name.

South Carolina women's basketball fans weren't going to let the fifth-year point guard go out unnoticed or uncelebrated.

Johnson got to soak in all she's done for the program stress-free. The No. 1 seed Gamecocks (33-3) beat No. 9 Southern Cal 101-61 in the second round of the Women's NCAA Tournament March 23, allowing coach Dawn Staley to pull her most vital player off the floor with seven minutes left.

"It's a storybook ending. I hope it continues throughout this tournament," Staley said. "I'm happy Raven is getting her flowers, finally, at the end of her career. Something we've given her but I think the rest of the country is finally seeing what she means to our program."

This game was about the fifth-year senior, regardless if she cares or not.

She scored her 1,000th career point in the victory in the most Johnson way possible.

She picked the passing lane of two guards and was all alone, scoring a fast-break layup to reach the milestone.

Johnson needed seven points and scored exactly that, finishing with four assists and two steals.

"Everybody keeps saying a thousand this, that, and a third. I'm not really thinking of that," Johnson said. "I'm worried about winning a national championship. That's the main goal, so, yeah, whatever comes with it, comes with it."

When Johnson sat at the podium post-game, the natural first question was about her emotions leaving the floor in CLA for the last time.

She turned to look at Staley, then looked back, saying, "You want the truth?" immediately resulting in a subtle "Oh my god," and look of fear from Staley, who has repeatedly said Johnson's comedic side keeps her on her toes.

"It hasn't hit me yet because we're not done yet," Johnson said, followed by a Staley sigh of relief.

She knows that the crowd and the fans are tearful at the thought of her last game for South Carolina but she's not giving in yet.

And as a result, neither is Staley.

"I can't be serious with Raven," Staley said of what she thought subbing Johnson out. "I just checked her temperature, she looked around ... that means she's locked in. Raven just wants to win another national championship and I hope she gets that because I do think she deserves it."

Johnson has played in 142 wins for South Carolina, the second most in program history. She's trying to be the first Staley player to win three national championships. The quest continues on March 28 (5 p.m. ET, ESPN) against Oklahoma, which marks Johnson's fifth straight Sweet 16.

When she's in the building, or on the court, her focus is unwavering. Even nights where nearly every fan is out of their seat to applaud her, she doesn't let herself think about it.

"I'm not going to cry but maybe at home I'm going to cry, behind closed doors," Johnson said.

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Burning March Madness hot takes

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So long, upsets, and goodnight Cinderella.

Goodnight, Hubert Davis? Maybe in a day or two.

Goodnight, Mark Pope? Wait 'til 2027 on that one.

Although blue-bloods North Carolina, Kentucky and UCLA are mired in misery, most of the big dogs march on in March. Cinderella's glass slipper shattered after the 2024 NCAA Tournament. Well, except for Iowa. The Hawkeyes retained a slipper.

What to make of the mostly chalky first two rounds?

Well, the easy and perhaps most relevant explanation is NIL and transfer free agency mostly benefited Power conference brands, at the expense of mid-majors.

Plus, this is a particularly good fresh-

man class, and Power programs tend to gobble up the five-star prospects. With so many five-stars (see Cameron Boozer and Darius Acuff) playing up to their billing, that's a boon for the high majors, because blue-chippers don't sign with mid-majors.

Also, this year's bubble was particularly weak. The wheat separated from the chaff. A soft bubble is good for front-runners.

Too much chalk?

Does a relative lack of major upsets amount to a boring tournament? That depends on your perspective. If your interest in March Madness mostly hinges on upsets and bracket-busting stunners, then this tournament isn't for you.

On the other hand, the favorites also ruled last year's tournament, but that created an epic Final Four featuring three great games, on the heels of some Sweet 16 and Elite Eight thrillers.

In other words: Stay tuned. The tournament should get better as it goes.

If you're hungry for upsets, though,

here are three possibilities for the Sweet 16:

Sweet 16 upset potential

No. 4 Arkansas over No. 1 Arizona: Arizona is the most complete team in the bracket, with five starters who each average in double digits, plus two bench players who started on last year's team that reached the Sweet 16.

So, why the upset potential? Well, because Arkansas is playing as well as anyone the past few weeks. John Calipari's team hasn't lost this month, and Acuff is becoming one of the top individual stories of the tournament. Asked about Acuff's 36-point barrage in the second-round win over High Point, Calipari said, "What you saw is what he be's."

I'm not sure if that's grammatically correct, but his point resonates, nonetheless.

No. 6 Tennessee over No. 2 Iowa State: Rick Barnes' two best NCAA

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Arkansas Razorbacks forward Malique Ewin (12) reacts after a play in the second half against the High Point Panthers during a second round game March 21 at Moda Center.

CRAIG STROBECK/IMAGN IMAGES