

Big East Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Monday, March 6, 2023

Uncasville, Connecticut, USA

Mohegan Sun Arena

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Lou Lopez Senechal

Aaliyah Edwards

Dorka Juhasz

Postgame Media Conference



Connecticut - 67, Villanova - 56

Q. Aaliyah, can you just describe what this means given what this team has been through this year, and those thoughts that went through your head as the confetti was pouring down and you just reflected on this season?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I mean, it means a lot. We put a lot into practice and everything we went through this season, all the struggles. And to still kind of come out with the same outcome that we wanted to coming into the season is amazing. And it just speaks to the character in our team.

But I know we speak a lot as players on how much we rely on one another. We couldn't have done this without Coach and the rest of the coaching staff. They really stuck with us. And even through the struggles and challenges they believed in us, and they still were there when we took the Ls. But they're even more there when we took the dubs. And it feels so much better to be celebrating a win with them.

Q. Aaliyah and Dorka, in particular, Villanova had 10 offensive rebounds on you guys early in the game. What really changed in the rebounding mindset to get even and then score the points in the paint that you did and just dominate in that area?

DORKA JUHASZ: I think kind of we took that personally. In the beginning we just kind of tried to figure out how to help each other and also find out a way to box them out. And obviously in the beginning of the game we were not very successful with that.

So I think that was an emphasis put on that, that we have to get the defensive rebounds and box out. And I think as the game went on, we took advantage of that and just kept pushing the ball and got some easy post-ups and easy scores in the paint. But that's just a quick switch of mindset and just be more physical and find a person to box out.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Everything that D mentioned, I think that we knew that they were going go on a run, and that happened. But we knew we were going to bounce back and be able to converge off their turnovers or off our defensive stops.

Q. Aaliyah, I'll ask you because you've been here the longest, but when Coach said the things that he said last week, essentially that he didn't want to hear any more talk about fatigue or injuries or those things, that he wanted that discussion to kind of go away, how did the team take that? How did you respond to that? How did the team respond to that?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I think that we responded well given what we did tonight. I think that we knew going into postseason it's going to be harder games. We were playing all the games we've matched up against the whole season. We just really had to lock in and come in with an aggressive mindset that we knew we wanted to get the job done here so that we could move on to our next postseason.

Q. Lou, this was your first Big East Tournament. What emotions was going through your head when the confetti fell? And what's this championship mean to you?

LOU LOPEZ SENECHAL: It feels special. Winning one conference championship last year and another conference this year, a year apart it feels really special doing it with this group of girls here.

Just right from the beginning we had a great chemistry and they just included me really well on the team. And I think that all the hard work that we had and all the struggles and

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the challenges that we've been through during the whole year, it's just really rewarding.

It feels special to do it with my teammates, the whole coaching staff. For my first and only year here, and I'm just really happy.

Q. Dorka, the third quarter that you guys were able to have, just coming out and the way you guys were playing offensively, just what was that mindset coming out of the locker room? And then to see Azzi knock down those three 3-pointers, how good was it to see her get those fall?

DORKA JUHASZ: I think coming out of that locker room we had the mindset that Villanova is a really good team. They showed they can come back from being down a lot. We wanted to make sure that we come out really strong, and in that first few minutes get some easy buckets, get some stops.

And it happened. I felt like our flow was really good. We know if Azzi misses a lot of shots in the first half it's going to go in the second half. It was nice to see her smile when that first shot go through. And after that we know it's just going to fall for her.

But it's good to have her back. Even if not scoring a lot of points, she's still putting affect into her offense, like you can't leave her open. It gives us spacing in the paint, getting a lot of paint points. And she's always been involved. And also on the defensive end, she's making a difference.

So her and Carol, having them back has been amazing, just having all 10 players is really special. And this is the perfect timing to have our whole team back. I'm excited to see how we're going forward.

Q. Every win you guys had this season, you guys had all these wins in double-digit figures. How do you maintain this assertiveness heading into the NCAA Tournament?

LOU LOPEZ SENECHAL: I think that those last three games kind of reflect on what team we can really be. And I think the beginning of the year that's the UConn that we were. And even though it was, the last couple of weeks were pretty rough for us, we still found a way to overcome all of that and find a way to find a solution during this tournament.

And I think that's the real team we can be, and we're going to bring the same team during the NCAA Tournament and having the same mindset.

Q. Dorka, as someone who works with Aaliyah every day in games and elsewhere, what kind of pride do you take in seeing what she's done this season and what she did the last three days here at this tournament?

DORKA JUHASZ: I mean, we're super proud of her. I think the whole season she's been carrying us. And I just remember, even last year, when the tournament came, a different Aaliyah came out to play.

I remember last year's Big East Tournament, she was just unstoppable. And I had no doubt that she was going to be unstoppable again. And she's just playing like an All-American. And we're super happy to have her, and she's been our leader this whole season, and she just keeps going. And I think we're all really proud of her.

And this is just the player who she's been. And obviously it's just her confidence is out the roof. And we're just so happy to see that. And she's a nightmare on offense and defense. She's been leading us the whole time.

Q. Aaliyah, you did struggle a little bit personally in February. Was the weight of the season kind of getting to you and carrying the team for a while, and what happened? You have refocused now and it seems like the dominant Aaliyah is back. Was there something that changed? Did you just need time to regather yourself?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I just think, with everything that was going on in the season, you know, as a team we were just going through different things, different bumps and bruises, but I just wasn't very consistent during that time period. But I knew that I was going to get it back.

The kind of player I am, I know that I'm kind of resilient that way. And my teammates carried me and gave me the confidence.

And we're in March. So I knew I had to step back up. And I think everyone's stepping up right now and we're all producing, either as offensively or defensively. And it shows that we can be a really great team when we want to be.

Q. Aaliyah, just the way you've been able to defend Maddy Siegrist all season long and other players throughout the year, where do you think you've grown the most on the defensive end? And how has that kind of factored into the great season you've had?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I think it's kudos to the coaching staff with the scouting reports. We really lock in, making

sure that defensively we're disciplined.

Maddy's a great player. So it was a tough assignment. I knew that if I got beat, my teammates were here on the back end helping me out. So I think it was a great team effort. We've been able to stop a lot of great players throughout the season. We've just got to continue that so we can produce offensively and be successful.

Q. With so many players missing time this year, can you just discuss what having Aaliyah there all year has meant to this team and what she meant during this tournament?

COACH AURIEMMA: She knocked out some of our guys, but she managed to stay in every game. And I think last year she was one of the few players that I think played just about every game.

So she's a durable kid, knock on wood, when she's got it going and feeling it and the confidence level is high. Like Dorka said, she's able to do pretty much whatever the game calls for.

When she goes on those rebounding tears, it's like she gets everyone at both ends of the floor -- and when she's attacking the basket and drawing fouls. So there's an element that she brings that, if you don't have that element it's hard to win tournament championships. It's hard to win in the postseason.

Q. It seems like it's a strange year across the nation. South Carolina is undefeated but they haven't been like the dominant team that you guys were when you won four in a row, running through everybody, they've had to rally at times. And everyone seems to lose to a bunch of people. How open do you think the NCAA is going to be whenever the bracket is revealed next Sunday for teams to come out and pull off some of these upsets as we've been seeing?

COACH AURIEMMA: Until somebody beats South Carolina, they're still undefeated and they're still the favorite, as they should be.

In terms of everyone else, yeah, it's really hard this year to pinpoint, given some of the conference tournament outcomes, it's really hard to pinpoint who really is playing, or has played, let's say, for the last three weeks, like you could say, they're pretty much going to be a championship contender.

So everybody's had their turn. Everybody's looked the part. Everybody's looked the other way, which is a great sign for the NCAA Tournament, which means that more

teams are in the mix, as it should be.

One of the things that the NCAA, the women's basketball tournament has to catch up, which we are, obviously we're still very young -- there has to be an uncertainty to the games. There has to be -- like last year, Creighton. There has to be teams coming out that you don't want to play in the postseason, that more upsets happen. Where you're seeded maybe is important, but whose bracket you're in and you catch the wrong team at the wrong time.

Years ago, that didn't matter as much because the favorites just kind of rolled through everybody. The talent has spread out a little bit more now and I think this might be one of the more exciting NCAA Tournaments in recent years.

Q. I know this has been a difficult year for you in a lot of different ways. Can you just talk about the feeling you had on the floor dancing I guess with your grandkids and dancing around the confetti, and I guess the relief and satisfaction, what was that like for you?

COACH AURIEMMA: Yeah, remember we talked about the other day about how you want winning to be special here at Connecticut, like it is every place else, instead of we have to win.

And it's just when you coach long enough, you describe coaching as there's misery and relief. And when you lose it's misery, and when you win it's relief. Not even joy.

But it almost felt like a chapter had been closed. I can sit back now and really let everything, like, wash over you that you've been holding in.

So many things have happened on and off the court this past season -- personally, team-wise, everything -- that to get to this point, you want to just close that book and now start a brand-new one starting next Sunday.

And it ended, that book ended the right way. It had a lot of acts and a lot of tragedies and a lot of ups and downs, a lot of stuff, but the book ended the right way. And now it's time for a new one.

And that's always exciting. These next 10 days we've got to go recruiting. We've got to still do our job. We can't just sit around and stare at our trophies. But for the next couple days, I think we're just going to take a deep breath and let it all come out. Holding a lot in.

Q. What happened with Aubrey today? She started the second half but then came out really quickly and

didn't come back in.

COACH AURIEMMA: Something happened in the first half and her back started to spasm up. So she went in the locker room at halftime, tried to get some work done on it.

And I thought I don't want her sitting around and it gets worse. So let's let her get out there and loosen up. And watching her go up and down the floor twice, I realized she wasn't going to be able to go.

So, back spasms. Having had back surgery, I don't blame her. I'm surprised it doesn't happen more often.

Q. You've seen all of Villanova teams, even though it wasn't hands on until the late '80s. They hit the top 10 for the first time today. Where is this team in the scheme of the programs, because you know they've had a few great ones along the way?

COACH AURIEMMA: I've always said, no disrespect to our players or any other players in the league, but when you have the best player on the floor, then you have a chance to win every game. Well, how do you know? Trust me, I've been there a lot. When you have the best player on the floor, you're a hard team to beat.

And there have been other good Villanova, outstanding Villanova teams, but maybe since the Shelly Pennefather years, when she clearly was the most dominant player, there hasn't been somebody who can single-handedly win a game for them. They've always had to do it as a team, and they did it exceptionally well.

And I think Denise coaches this team brilliantly. And they play hard and they play with an edge and there's a toughness about them. And I think they're going to be hard as hell to beat in the NCAA Tournament, I don't care who they play. Because if you haven't played them and you haven't seen that, you're in for a treat.

Q. You talked a few months ago about learning to kind of relinquish what you can't control and focus on what you can. I guess from a coaching perspective how has that journey been the last few months? And is it easier said than done? Or how would you describe where you are on that?

COACH AURIEMMA: It comes and goes. Somebody said you should lean on your staff a little bit more. And I go, they already do everything. I have the easiest job probably of any head coach in the country because my staff is just unbelievably good.

What I have to constantly be on the lookout for is wanting

every game and every possession and every day to be like yesterday, or like the first three quarters today. And that's just not possible.

So you start to learn to take that -- they were brilliant yesterday, and for three quarters, we're up 25, with 3:25 in the quarter, we were magnificent.

So if you're going to enjoy that, then you've got to take the fourth quarter, too, and just laugh it off. And back in the day I had a hard time doing that, back in the day meaning last week. (Laughter)

After we lost the Xavier game. Did we lose the Xavier game? Actually we won, but it felt like a loss. It felt like a loss.

And Jamelle's always reminding me of that. C.D. is always reminding me of that. You win a game but you play lousy, you're unhappy because you keep projecting, like this is unacceptable, we can't go on like this, la, la, la, la, la.

Don't go in the locker room and make this feel like a loss. Save that for tomorrow. And I've gotten much, much better at that.

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