

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Mercer vs UConn

Saturday, March 19, 2022

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

UConn Huskies

Geno Auriemma

Paige Bueckers

Dorka Juhasz

Media Conference

Uconn 83, Mercer 38.

THE MODERATOR: We'll begin with opening remarks from coach and then take questions for the student athletes.

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I think the game probably went like you probably expect. First round games tend to take awhile to get settled into. And I thought the first half was kind of choppy and a little bit disjointed in trying to find that rhythm.

And our defense was good and our offense I thought was a little bit out of sync. I think changing the starting lineup and putting a sub in the starting lineup I think affected us more than I thought it would. But it takes a little bit of time in that first game and I thought we came out in the second half and we played exceptionally good defense in that third quarter and that got everything going in the right direction and got us more involved offensively.

And it was more like what I expect to see and hopefully we'll see a lot more of that Monday night because we'll need a lot more of that for sure.

Q. Playing 24 minutes today it seemed like there was a comfort that you felt throughout the game, number one. Number two, it seemed like the movements you had were a little bit smoother from this view. Just take me through what it felt like and what, if any, differences you felt compared to the Big East tournament.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I think ever since the end of the Big East tournament I've just tried to lock in mentally



and physically and trying to do whatever I have to do, cut certain stuff out and just really lock in these next, this next month.

Just getting my body prepared, my mind prepared, and I think in the last 10 days I really locked in on that. So that's helped me gain confidence in my movements and what I'm doing on the court and then just my teammates giving me confidence, my coaches giving me confidence, and just to keep working, and they're going to be by my side and help me through that.

So I think just a whole lot of confidence and moving better and the preparation has helped me be better on the court.

Q. It's so rare here in UConn that a senior makes her NCAA tournament debut here. So can you just describe the raw emotion you felt in contributing and finally making it to the tournament and contributing on a tournament-winning team?

DORKA JUHÁSZ: I mean, it was very exciting. As you said, as a senior, that was my first game, so I was, obviously I was a little nervous, excited to be here and just it felt good. It felt good that I was out on the court with this team and I'm happy that we got this win.

Obviously it wasn't perfect and personally my play wasn't perfect either. But it was definitely a good experience for me.

Q. We're early in March Madness and for lack of better words we already saw some surprises in the tournament. What was the, what was Coach's words to you guys to set the tone defensively to start the game?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Just to play our game. No matter the opponent, no matter who we're playing, we got to be focused on ourselves. And we take pride here in putting our defense first and letting the offense come after that. So just being able to lock in.

And we worked super hard in practice on defense and that's our sort of standing ground, just holding people to



less points and just being active on defense. So just no matter what team we're playing, no matter what round it is, we're just focused on that.

Q. You were very efficient but you only took seven shots. Did you hear anything negative from your coach about not shooting enough?

PAIGE BUECKERS: No. I think I'm just still trying to find my way back in. Obviously different role today in the starting lineup. I'm not really looking to force shots. I'm just looking to shoot when I'm open and get everybody else involved.

That's what I did last year. That's what I'm going to continue to do this year, and if the game calls for me to take 15 shots, then, or two shots, doesn't really matter to me.

Q. What did you guys do defensively for the third period? Because you basically shut them out the whole third period. They didn't score one point at all. What were you guys doing defensively to keep them shut out of the third period?

DORKA JUHÁSZ: I think just that full court pressure, kind of being more aggressive. Even the first half we did more of the full court pressure. But I thought in the third quarter it was more, we were more locked in. It was more, like it was sharper. We were able to get some steals, get some traps.

So I think it was just a different kind of mindset, a little bit more aggressive, a little bit more locked in, and that's how we have to come out the first quarter as well.

Q. It seems like no matter who is in the game, whatever the combination is, the defense still looks the same, still has the same intensity, the same level. How have you guys developed that in practice with nine people kind of playing with one mind defensively?

DORKA JUHÁSZ: I think that everybody's just being ready whenever their time is coming up and I think that's what we really did. We're not really talking about who is playing, how many minutes, stuff like that. So I think it's really good that whoever is coming off the bench they're coming to play. They're coming to be aggressive and kind of give that second wind and everything when that new player is in and be aggressive.

And sometimes other teams play a lot of players for the whole quarter so whenever maybe they're getting a little tired that second lineup can come in and be aggressive. So I think everybody's just ready to play, and whenever it

is, if it's end of a quarter, middle of the quarter, it doesn't matter, I think, and we're just taking pride in that.

Q. The team was pretty good defensively last year but it seems like this year it's even elevated that to new level. From watching on the bench for so long this season but also being back in the fold now where do you see the biggest areas of growth on the defensive end of the floor from last year to this year?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think just our mindset. Last year we played our best basketball in the Big East tournament and the NCAA tournament when we really had our defense figured out. So I think we just tried to get that from the start this year instead of waiting until the tournaments play really good defense.

So just a shift in mindset and putting that first and letting the offense -- when our defense is great our offense is going to come naturally. So just putting that first and I think just picking up the intensity and the aggressiveness was huge for us.

Also having that depth just to be able to full court pressure like we did today. Whenever guys get tired we have a new group or subs come in and they apply the same pressure. So I think that also affected it.

Q. What's it like now to have Aubrey back on the sideline? Obviously she's not working out quite yet, but just having her presence back with the team.

DORKA JUHÁSZ: It's been awesome. We always got the good luck test every single time we play from Aubrey and now it's great that she's actually here. It's just awesome to see her. I think she likes to be with us, around us, and it helps her to be, get better with her recovery and it helps us to feel that we actually have the full team here.

And we really appreciate her on the bench. She's always very supportive and it's just great to have the whole team here.

Q. Coach joked about you being a sub and starting today, but were you nervous at all or anything like that starting, going back into the lineup to start the NCAA tournament?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think I get nervous before every game just because I care so much and I want to do so well for my teammates and my coaches and the whole program.

So it doesn't matter what role I'm playing, whether it be off the bench, starting, 30 minutes, 10 minutes, I think I just



have so much passion for the game that I'm going to be excited and nervous and anxious for every single game. So I guess it doesn't really matter the role.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you. We'll take questions for coach.

Q. In the first quarter it was an eight-point lead and you lost the turnover battle 6-5. What was the message to the team in the end of the first quarter huddle and how do you think they responded from there on out?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, one thing I've learned over the last couple years, you know, you just try to get your point across, but you're not always quite sure whether or not it's being received the same every day.

We went into the game wanting to play quickly and make sure that we created as many possessions as possible. And one of the downsides to playing like that is you try to play a little too quickly sometimes and play fast and make passes and make decisions that you wouldn't ordinarily make.

And I thought defensively Mercer did a pretty good job of forcing some of our other guys to have to make shots early in the game. That always takes a little bit of time to get used to. But as Paige said, the best thing that can you do for your offense is get your defense where it needs to be and let that translate into offense. I thought from the second quarter on we did that.

Q. Obviously Paige talked about being comfortable with whatever minutes, whatever role. 24 is the high, I think, that she's had since she's been back. Is your thinking, has the thinking been how do we get her to a point where she's at full strength for the duration of this tournament or does this more closely align with kind of where you see her maximum minutes likely to be here in the tournament?

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't think there's any set amount of time that we have. Initially we did. When she was first coming back there was. But right now I just kind of go by what I see and what it feels like and what I think, trying to read her mind or trying to read her body language, and try to be respectful too of we have a game on Monday.

So I think there's a lot of decisions that go into that. But right now I don't have a particular number in mind. Today, if it was 24 today, it could be 20 tomorrow. It could be 30 or 20 on Monday. It could be 30 on Monday. I think a lot depends on what the game looks like and what she looks like.

Q. What worked so well for you guys defensively during that third quarter and for most of the last three quarters?

GENO AURIEMMA: By the time you get to this point in the season, if you've been paying attention as a player, which is asking a lot, like, if you've been paying attention, by the time you get to this point in the season where you played 30-some games, there really isn't anything that you're going to see that you say, you know guys, I think we're going to have a real problem on Saturday because they run some stuff on offense that we've never seen all year long.

So everything that you see at this time of the year you've seen it before. You've had to guard it. You've had some success with it. And then it's just a matter of can you get your players to play with the certain intensity level.

And there's teams that you can play full court more. There's some you can't play full court. There's some you can trap more. There's some you can't trap. So it's a lot of decisions based on what does a team look like that we're playing and what did we do when we played other teams that looked like this.

And so it takes a little bit of time to figure out how a team wants to attack you, and I think once we figured that out, and then how the game's being called, how aggressive you can be. So a lot of those things go into the decisionmaking, but mainly it's all about what's your effort and what your communication's like on defense and I thought in the third quarter, at halftime I wasn't too pleased.

I wasn't too thrilled at all with the way the first 20 minutes went. I thought we came out with a different attitude in the third quarter.

Q. Dorka was, has a 10-10, a double-double. Has, she has appeared to be playing with a great deal of intensity, kind of in the last seven, eight games that we didn't see earlier in the season. Do you have a some comment on how that suddenly kicked in because she was all over the place today.

GENO AURIEMMA: I wish I could say I knew the answers to these questions, but I would just be guessing.

But I think players want to play. That's number one. One of the positives of having people that had to sit out so much time and you're constantly missing players, is players are playing a lot of minutes. They know they're going to play a lot of minutes. And they start to learn to be productive.

Now, when you start to add those players and bring them back, if you're smart, you think, well, I want to play the same number of minutes I was playing before those guys came back, so I better get my act together and make sure that I'm playing at that level or it's going to be easy to just go, okay, next.

So I think having the ability to take someone out when they're not playing well and then remind them of why they were playing in the first place, that goes a long way.

And Dorka's a competitive kid and I love how hard she plays. I love how competitive she is. It never surprises me how hard she works defensively, how hard she works rebounding the ball. That's probably been the biggest contribution that she's made to our team.

The points have been great, yeah, but passing the ball, rebounding the ball, playing defense, I think all those things have been really, really solid for the majority of the year, more so now, though.

Q. I know you've talked a lot about communicating with contemporary players, but is the buy-in of this group on defense, on playing defense, is it exceptional, is it extraordinary, or is it maybe just typical of your better teams that you've had?

GENO AURIEMMA: I would say it's typical of the best teams we've had. You can't win with just playing really good defense, you know? Otherwise there would be a lot of great defensive teams that win a lot of championships.

You still have to be able to put the ball in the basket, right? So you have to be able to score.

But the best teams that we've had over the years have been really hard to score against, really hard to run their offense against, and because we put the kind of pressure we put on them by scoring, now it puts even more pressure on them to have to score and it just, you know, kind of accelerates the down slide.

But not every team wants to play at this level defensively. Not every team wants to play this hard. For a young team I think it's pretty unusual, for as many young players as we have, that they want to be that good defensively. I think Nika is a big deal in all that. I think when she's not in the game our defense is not the same and you saw it today. The minute she enters the game, things change, and then people get caught up and now it's contagious.

And the beauty of being able to recruit pretty good offensive players and then making them play defense is that you can't shoot your way into our lineup. I mean you

can, but you better make 'em all. And then we have had some guys that played a lot of minutes that didn't play any defense, but they made 'em all, so, yeah. You got to make exceptions for some people.

But every good team that's going to be left standing in the NCAA tournament a couple weeks from now is probably going to be a really, really good defensive team and if we want us to be that team, then it has to be as good as it was today and even better.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

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