

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - UCF vs UConn

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Storrs, Connecticut, USA

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Christyn Williams

Azzi Fudd

Media Conference

UConn - 52, UCF - 47

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by UConn head coach Geno Auriemma and student-athletes Christyn Williams and Azzi Fudd.

COACH AURIEMMA: I can honestly say that, given the kind of season we've had, I thought I'd pretty much seen it all. But this was a rather new experience for me.

It was what we thought it would be. It was going to be really difficult. It was going to be really ugly looking, and it was. It was. And we could have just as easily let that game get away from us and we didn't. There's something to be said for that, that you can win a game that you probably would look back and say I'm not sure how we won that game, but we did.

And Christyn and Azzi were really tough down the stretch. And Christyn played like the kind of senior you need to be at this time of her career. So we need to be a lot better on Saturday, that's for sure.

Q. Christyn, what was it like playing in that game? You are familiar with UCF, obviously, from back in the day, but to be in that environment with the crowd and to be, felt like a rock fight, I'm sure, but to have to battle down the stretch, the first time in a while because you guys haven't had that many close games.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Yeah, it was a battle the whole game. When we played them my freshman and sophomore year, they were always super aggressive. We knew coming into this game they would be very physical and very aggressive. We just tried to throw the first punch



and keep punching them.

We didn't have our best game today, but I'm really proud of our team. We grinded it out. It was very ugly, but we got the dub and that's all that matters.

Q. Christyn, how difficult was it to retain your poise down the stretch the way you guys did? And in particular, what did Azzi show you tonight that maybe you haven't even seen this season, as far as keeping her poise and composure, both team and Azzi in particular?

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Yeah, I thought we were very poised down the stretch as a team. We had to limit our turnovers because they were pressing the entire game. And kudos to Azzi. She did a very good job of handling the ball in the back court. And just -- you did. You're a freshman, bro. You did good. So she was very poised. She might not think she was, but it's hard out there, especially as a freshman. But she did very good, and I'm just proud of our team that we held it together down the stretch.

Q. Azzi, you took some shots early. They didn't fall. You kept slinging them up there, and you made some damage in the end, hit some free throws. Talk about the tough environment because it's the first time really for you.

AZZI FUDD: The atmosphere was amazing. That's definitely something I've never experienced to this kind of level. That made the game a lot of fun. I think that also helped with our momentum, just the crowd was great.

But just the shots, my teammates had confidence in me. When my shot wasn't falling, they just kept telling me to shoot and kept finding me and giving me great looks. That's kind of what I did.

Q. Azzi, you've been in a lot of tough games this season. Did you think that's helped you this season to try and get through this one and have to grind this one out?

AZZI FUDD: For sure. Not just the tough games but I think the adversity we faced off the court as well has helped prepare us. You saw Liv and Aaliyah fouled out. And each time the next big was ready, Dorka was ready at the end to come in and filled that position and did what she needed and what we needed.

Q. Christyn, what went through your mind or what was maybe some of the conversation right from the get-go when Aaliyah goes flying into the corner with Battles and the chair goes in another direction, and Paige is wrestling with the ball? Seemed like right from the get-go that was the kind of tone that was set. How did you guys respond to that?

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Well, we knew it was going to be like that from the tip-off. It was going to be an aggressive game and a physical game. And we just fought back. That was the only thing we really could do was just hold our own and fight back. And that's exactly what happened, we just kept on throwing punches and eventually they backed down.

Q. Sometimes out there it looked more like UFC than UCF that you were playing against. How much did Aaliyah, how much did Aaliyah's physicality down low set the tone for you guys in terms of fighting back, and how important was she in this game?

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Aaliyah was very important. Even though she fouled out, she held it down for the bigs tonight. I thought she was very physical and did a great job defensively and offensively. We wouldn't have won the game without her.

Q. From a player's perspective how much insertion of Nika Mühl, particularly her defense, impact the outcome of this game?

AZZI FUDD: I think the energy that Nika brings to our team is incredible. As soon as she steps on the floor the defensive intensity goes up. She hit a huge 3 for us as well -- right? That was her? She hit a huge 3. And she brings so much to our team. The energy level is amazing when she comes in.

Q. Christyn, it seems like you've kind of been doing battle all season with these guys. Is this a team you went into this game knowing it was going to be tough, but is this a team you're proud to kind of go fight for a win against UCF? Are you proud of the toughness and resilience of this team tonight?

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Yeah, I'm super proud of my teammates. I thought we did a great job tonight.

Obviously we have things to clean up and sharpen up, but we really grinded it out and fought hard to get this win and it feels really good.

Q. What do you hope to do -- Coach said you'll have to play a lot better Saturday against a good Indiana team -- I know you're just getting off this game, but what do you think you have to do better against Indiana to pull off that victory?

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: We have to do better at finishing easy buckets. And also when we get a lead we just have to keep our lead and not let the team come back. We have to sharpen up our defense and some things on offense, too. But the majority of it is finishing easy baskets.

Q. One of the issues for much of this year was turnovers. Here you had a team that pressed you full time and you only turned the ball over 13 times. What does that say about your guard play going forward?

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: I thought -- we practiced it all week. So we got better at it this week. But I thought the guards did a good job at just handling their pressure and getting the ball up the floor. I didn't realize that we had 13 turnovers, but they're a good pressing team. I thought we just did a good job tonight at handling it the majority of the game.

Q. Geno, the bottom line, you won, like you said in your opening statement. Is there some added value of having to grind out a game like that headed towards a regional? Ordinarily you're kind of breezing through this round. I wonder if this is, like, wow, it wasn't aesthetically pleasing or put it out of your mind or is there additional value of going through this experience?

COACH AURIEMMA: I think there's always value when you have to struggle to get something. Not that there isn't in playing exceptionally well and winning by a lot because you executed great. There's obviously value in that as well.

But I do think at this time of the year, those games should be an exception rather than the rule. Over the years, you know, we've kind of made it seem commonplace. But if you look around the country, these games are supposed to be difficult. They're supposed to be tough. And you do learn a lot. You find out a little bit about yourself and you don't necessarily have to shoot 60 percent from the floor to win a game.

We outscored them by 20. We got down eight and we got up 12. So obviously we did a bunch of really good things

to do that. And then we did what we do this year and we allowed ourselves to do what we do and made it very difficult on ourselves.

So there's a lot to be gained by realizing that you can do two things. You can play really, really well and get up a bunch, and then you're capable of doing things that let the game get back to three. And knowing that, I think, is valuable, for sure.

Q. You knew you were expecting a physical game here. How much did Nika and Aaliyah, having those two players on your team, help you get past this game? And was it what you expected? Was it more than you expected in terms of physicality?

COACH AURIEMMA: I mean, they're both young kids. They both play with a lot of passion. They want to be good. They want to play hard. They want to compete. And there's going to be a learning curve where you have to learn how to do that without getting yourself on the bench with five fouls, or in Nika's situation, committing a couple fouls that are absolutely crucial, you know, one second left on the shot clock, where a kid is taking a shot that's got no chance of going in and you give them two free throws.

So part of the growing process is how do I keep doing the great things that I do and how do I eliminate, how do I let my strength, which is how hard I play be a detriment sometimes to the way I play for our team.

So I wouldn't trade those guys for anybody in the world. And we need them playing. We don't need them on the bench with fouls. I think Saturday both of them are going to be even more important than they were today because Saturday's game is going to be, in some ways, it will be different but it will be tougher than today's game.

Q. 32 minutes today for Paige. I figure you probably didn't want to play her that much, but she gave you an awful lot didn't she, poise, when you needed it out there?

COACH AURIEMMA: I mean, I don't expect Paige to play great. You know? I don't care if we play 35 more games in the next three weeks. I think the expectation level for me is really, really low given how much time she sat out, given what she's coming off of.

So, those moments that she has that are really, really good, I'm happy. I'm thrilled for her. But there's still a lot going on out on the court that you can see that it's not the same player that we saw all of last year.

But having her on the court, obviously, benefits us in so

many ways. And the fact that I had her on the floor for 32 minutes says something, you know?

Q. You said a moment ago that this was a rather new experience for you. I was just wondering what you meant by that. And what, like as the game was going on tonight and taking forever, what was going through your mind?

COACH AURIEMMA: When I said it's a new experience, I mean I have a certain vision of how the game is played. And for 30-some years we played the game that way. And tonight we didn't play the game that way, not even close. So I'm experiencing things this year I've never experienced before. And I guess it's supposed to make me a better person.

I mean, I feel invigorated just walking up here. I feel like I just got back from visiting Cat Stevens and seeing things I've never seen before. So by going through that I think I'm a changed person.

Q. You mentioned the fouls that Nika had. Is that the reason she didn't play in the second half?

COACH AURIEMMA: No, not at all. Every time you put somebody in the game, you have to take somebody out. Today I just made that decision, there was nothing that Nika did that we needed -- we needed somebody who is a scorer. We didn't need anybody to help us play better defense tonight.

Obviously she came in the second quarter. I mean the whole second quarter she played almost. And she was instrumental in changing the tempo of the game. But I just felt like we needed offense and nothing against Nika at all. Nothing.

Q. I think Pat likened that to cage fighting. How would you describe the style of that play? I'm sure there's players on both teams that are going to have fresh bruises.

COACH AURIEMMA: Yeah, you know, sometimes we forget that basketball is a game that involves a lot of contact. And I heard, what was the description one time -- football is a collision sport; basketball is a contact sport, right? So there's going to be a lot of contact.

Each game there's the difference in what constitutes contact and how much contact, what kind of contact -- and you've got to get through the game that you're playing in. And if it's being played a certain way you've got to play that way.

All of us that played on the playground or played in school or played in college, you know. There's times when you're just in a rock fight and you just gotta figure out a way to get through it.

And there's other times where it feels like you're at a ballet and nobody's touching nobody. And everything is cool. You shoot, I shoot, you shoot, I shoot. West Coast basketball. I think we had some West Coast officials. So maybe that was the case.

Q. Did you think your team kind of responded to the tone of the game in a positive way, like just the way they were going out with that aggression and toughness and trying to punch back, especially that one play where Paige was tussling with the ball?

COACH AURIEMMA: I think we all have this vision of what toughness is. Some people think it's you making a show of how tough you are by how you act or what you say or your posturing or whatever. Or you knock somebody on their ass and it's a foul, and you think, I'll show you that's tough.

I thought the first quarter primarily we were so hyped up, I think between what our students did today, which is unbelievable, right? They made it feel like an extra special game. I think they reminded everyone why Connecticut basketball is Connecticut basketball and way our fans are viewed the way they're viewed.

But I think it also got us so amped up that shots that we normally make with our eyes closed in other games we struggle with. So it took us a while to settle in to the pace of the game. Toughness is making all those free throws at the end, making eight free throws. Toughness is getting a huge rebound at a big time. Toughness is Christyn making that 3 when she had to make it. And I think we showed that. I think all the other stuff was just fluff.

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