

Big East Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 6, 2022

Uncasville, Connecticut, USA

Mohegan Sun Arena

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Evina Westbrook

Dorka Juhasz

Postgame Media Conference



UConn - 71, Marquette - 51

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by UConn.

Q. Dorka, so the first time you met Marquette you had a big day with 21 points. And the rematch in Hartford, they limited you to just two. In this game, putting up 13 points, what got you back to that form that you were in when you met them the first time out in Milwaukee?

DORKA JUHASZ: I wasn't think about that at all. I knew from the first time we met I might have some chances to shoot the ball from outside just because their defense is so focusing on guarding around the basket. That's why I was able to get some shots up today.

And I don't think it was anything different. I just probably was in better positioning on offense to get those shots. And my teammates were trusting me with the ball. But it wasn't anything special that I was thinking coming into this game.

Q. Evina, could you discuss the defensive effort of the team during this tournament and how much of that has to do with having everybody back and everybody being fresh and being able to sub in so often?

EVINA WESTBROOK: I think that's something we talked about in the locker room at halftime. We had kind of went on a little stretch, 3- to 2-little-minute stretch where the offense was really clicking right before the half, but we talked about it amongst ourselves that even though the offense wasn't clicking the defense really held it down. I felt we were starting to understand ourselves defensively, and it's coming together at the right time. And it feels really good.

We also talked about how that first five is out there and that second five comes in, it's really hard for a team to, like Marquette, they're only playing seven, eight people -- for them and they're already tired and things like that.

But our defense is looking really good. Just we're being really aggressive. And a lot of the mistakes we're making on defense, we've covering them up pretty good.

Q. Dorka, Evina mentioned it briefly, but when you check into a game after seven, eight minutes, nine minutes, do you kind of sense the other team is tired? Do you maybe see it in their eyes or sense that you're kind of wearing them down with the way you're rotating players?

DORKA JUHASZ: Definitely. I think also just looking at it from the bench a little bit, just kind of, you can get a little feel of the game how it goes, just how we can impact the game, whoever is coming off the bench.

So I think that's really helpful for us, just to get a few people in and just kind of pressure the ball on defense and everything like that.

But definitely you can feel sometimes that they're getting tired. So if I can run the floor a little bit more, a little harder, I think that shows on our offense and defense, too.

Q. Evina, how important was it to get off to the start you got off to? They scored 105 yesterday and you held them to six in the first quarter. Christyn was open a bunch of times on those back-door cuts. Just that kind of set the tone for the game. How important was that?

EVINA WESTBROOK: Super important. C was out there doing what C does. But it was just within the flow of our offense. So our post players do a really good job of making great passes and great assists, feeding the ball. And she was being aggressive, getting to the basket and knocking down shots.



And our defense was amazing today. That's something we've got to take forward to the games we've got coming next.

Q. And everybody was aggressive?

EVINA WESTBROOK: Everybody was aggressive. Aaliyah was amazing down there, crashing the board -- Dorka, Liv, everyone.

Q. Wanted to follow up on the depth. You guys were able to get a couple of players back towards the end of the regular season, but now getting to see that in the postseason and what does it mean going forward, how much more confident does that make you? And does it impact the way you guys, kind of mentality coming into games?

EVINA WESTBROOK: I think at first having everyone back was kind of weird. Especially seeing Paige out there for the first time in so long. We're just so used to hearing her chirp from the bench and stuff.

But it feels really good to have everyone back. And I think it -- not pressure necessarily, but when guys are tired, it's cool to see the next five, however many people are coming in, that that second five can be that first five, too.

So it feels good. And I feel like as a confidence for the team as a whole and I think it does that for us.

DORKA JUHASZ: I mean, I agree with that, whatever Evina said. It's good to have everybody back. I always say that, but the first time everybody was starting to warm up and you looked around and I was, like, oh, my God, everybody's finally back.

It's been a really challenging season. There's always new people out every single time. So I think it's the perfect timing. I think now that obviously we're still missing some opportunities out on -- some opportunities on offense that I think once we're starting to get everybody's going to play well, then I think we're going to be really dangerous.

EVINA WESTBROOK: We're still missing Aubrey. Can't forget about Aubrey. But she's here with us in spirit.

Q. You mentioned hearing Paige chirp from the bench for so long. Are you starting to get that back closer to normal in the games or what's that like?

EVINA WESTBROOK: She still chirps whether she's on the court or on the bench. But, no, it's definitely fun playing with her again. And just her as a basketball player, but just like how she sees the game, how she speaks and things

like that.

It does take us to another level and especially for teams having to guard her in a certain way. But it feels good to have her back, most definitely.

Q. This is the second game in a row where Christyn has dominated the first period and got you guys off to the good start. Is that something you've asked her to do? And then she kind of also has kind of disappeared after that the last two games. Is it just telling her to go out full force and get you guys off to these starts, or what has her role been?

COACH AURIEMMA: There hasn't been anything specifically that's been said or done that's changed anything. I just think this time of year, if you're a senior and you're at UConn, you have to have an impact on the game, every game that you play. You have to come out and feel good about the impact you've had.

Christyn's a very streaky player. When things are going great she's really, really good. When things start to go a little bit sideways she kind of loses her aggressiveness. And that's something that we have talked about, staying aggressive.

But to start the game like that, especially with Paige not in the starting lineup, you need somebody that's gotta do it. And she's the perfect candidate for that. And she gets a lot of opportunities. She's just making the most of them right now.

Q. Aaliyah only finished with eight points today, but she had such a huge impact on the game. You've talked about her the last couple of weeks. Is she just in a great place right now where she's bringing a physicality every game at this point?

COACH AURIEMMA: Yeah, for the longest time we were trying to find out why there was such a difference from last season to this season. And the change has been so noticeable. Can't put my finger on why. But she's practicing better. She's playing better. She's more confident. She's getting more things accomplished.

And the games reflect that when you look at the intangible parts of the game, yeah, but the 11 rebounds today, that's a tangible thing -- the eight points. But, to me, it's just the way she looks and the way it feels having her out there right now that's really, really good.

Q. Not only in terms of your games and the teams that you're playing, but even when you look around the country, the upsets in some of the tournaments,

obviously a big one today. Do you have a sense that maybe your team has caught a second wind at a time when maybe some other teams are kind of getting tired from this season? You guys have picked up a little something, picked up on this.

COACH AURIEMMA: There might be some of that. There might be. I worry -- this time of year, I always worry anyway -- but I worry about making sure that we're healthy mentally, because, to me, physically people aren't going to change that much.

People are going to, I think, get smarter if they want to over the course of a month-long tournament. The month of January, people can start getting a little bit more intelligent basketball-wise.

But I don't think they're going to change that much physically. And we had a lot of players play a lot of minutes. But it's funny because we had players who played a lot of minutes and then they would have two weeks off. And then somebody else would have to play a lot of minutes and then they get three days off or four days off.

So no one's been out there long enough where you could say they got worn out this year or they got enough stamina that they can go a whole year or a whole tournament.

So we're in a perfect situation in terms of we have players that have played a lot of minutes that can go a lot of minutes if they had to. We have players that are rearing to go to play more minutes because they haven't played hardly at all this year.

You take the game Azzi had today. Three weeks ago we might have lost today's game if we can't get those points. Because Dorka might not have had that. E might not have had that. But there's this feeling now that we know we're going to get them; we just don't know from where. And for a while it was Paige in the beginning and then it became Caroline, and then it became Azzi. And now we just know. We're going to get them; we just don't know where, which, I guess that's a good thing.

Q. You talked about being mentally healthy. Is that where Evina is right now? For her to come off the bench as well as she has been, lead you in scoring today, seems like she's in a good spot.

COACH AURIEMMA: Yeah. Listen, when a coach changes your role, you can go one of two ways. You can embrace it and make the most of it and actually shine in that role. Or you can feel slighted in some way or especially when you're a senior. And then it goes the other

way and you get nothing accomplished.

So a lot of respect for E the way she's handled this. And for the longest time, too, she was the first guard off the bench, right? Now that Paige is around, sometimes I go to E, sometimes I go to Paige. Depends on what I'm looking for out there.

Then I've just got a feeling halfway through the game, we're going to put E in the game and she makes two straight 3s from the corner -- or one from the corner, one in front of us. So she's doing a little bit of everything. And it's a lot better than a lot of nothing.

Q. I know you have some more work to do in your own neighborhood tomorrow night. But looking at the national picture, the South Carolina loss and LSU and Louisville, how wide open do you consider this national tournament this year? And do you care what you're seeded and what you play?

COACH AURIEMMA: No, I really don't. We've talked about this at home with our guys that are around us a lot. You earn your spot. You earn your place. So at the beginning of the season they say, these are the four places. And now everybody has the same chance to earn those four spots.

And for the last 15 years, however long, we're a No. 1, No. 1 seed. So we go wherever that place is. And it's not like people are lined up from here to Chicago bidding to host.

So there's only so many that are going to do it. And UConn gets this reputation of they're always playing close to home. Well, that tends to happen when you're undefeated and you're a No. 1 seed. So we earned that.

Well, this year somebody else may have earned it, probably. And, so, wherever they put us, that's where we're going to go. And looking at today -- I don't know how much that's changed. Maybe the teams that were slated to go wherever they were slated to go are still going to go there anyway.

I just know that wherever they had us three weeks ago, I don't think they'd have us there anymore. I don't know where they're changing us to, but I don't think we're where they thought we were going to be three weeks ago or a month ago.

Q. (Indiscernible) wide open?

COACH AURIEMMA: There's some teams that I think have proven to be that good. South Carolina being one. NC State being another one. Or Stanford being another



one. And Louisville to a certain extent. And there's some teams that people don't talk about that much that are going to probably surprise a lot of people in the tournament.

And usually it's pretty predictable in some ways. It's kind of a bit like college football. It gets to be pretty predictable at times, who is going to be where.

Walsh and I were having a funny conversation one time. Somebody said to him, you know, it's a lot easier to make the Final Four in women's basketball than it is in men's basketball. And Walsh started laughing. He goes, actually it's not. There's only three spots available because UConn has the one spot.

There's this perception that the same teams are going to be there every year. And this year may be one of those years where a lot of people get surprised.

Q. Tomorrow night will be 18th consecutive season in the conference tournament final and I think it's 32-2 in conference semifinals. What does that say about the consistency of your program? And my second part is Michigan then beat Ohio State today. So I guess Phil Martelli can still coach, can't he?

COACH AURIEMMA: Yeah, Phil can still coach. He has really good players to coach right now. Just goes to show you, you're only as good as the players you're coaching. And he's got a really good group of guys and was put in an impossible situation. And he's done more than you could ever expect. So I'm thrilled about that.

The conference tournament thing for us, it has been a long time. It's been something that we've taken great pride in and we've never taken it for granted.

I think teams and programs go through peaks and valleys. And our peaks are pretty high and our valleys over the years have not been too low. So we managed to stay at or near a certain level.

But I have to tell you, I told the team today, this last month -- I don't know, maybe since the Marquette game at Marquette, the fourth quarter at that game, maybe since, I don't know, maybe since the Villanova game, since we lost the Villanova game here, I don't know -- but there was a point in time that we started to look like the UConn teams of old. And it's taken a long time to get there. Now I just hope we can stay there for another 15 years. But it's taken a long time to get back there.

We've never taken it for granted. But I know it when I see it and I know a lot of people watching were, like, this is what I'm used to. This is what I'm used to seeing UConn

do in past years. And that hasn't necessarily been there in the last four or five years. So I'm more excited about that than whatever number this is or whatever number tomorrow is. I don't know what that is, those numbers. Although I did see the ACC trophy. That thing's nice. I've got to ask Walsh how I can get one of those.

Q. You talked about the UConn teams of old. Is that defensive intensity, is it people contributing -- what are you talking about when you saying that unfold?

COACH AURIEMMA: Everything starts with what's happening on the defensive end and the pride that you take on every single possession that you feel it's important to you personally that we get a stop.

And I don't think that that's as easy to do anymore as it used to be. We used to have a pretty good plan and it worked all the time. We would try to recruit players that can score. And we've certainly been successful at that over the years.

And then we bitch at them every minute of every day to play defense and they did. When you have players that can score and they're willing to commit themselves to play defense that hard, then you start to see some of the stuff that you guys have been seeing for X number of years.

It's just for a short period of time here recently it's been missing. It's been missing. And I'll be the first to admit it, that this is the closest that it's looked. And I feel really good about it. I'm happy for them, happy for us, happy for our fans because that's what they've come to expect.

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