

# Big East Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Monday, March 7, 2022

Uncasville, Connecticut, USA

Mohegan Sun Arena

**UConn Huskies**

**Coach Geno Auriemma**

**Christyn Williams**

**Aaliyah Edwards**

**Evina Westbrook**

Postgame Media Conference



UConn - 70, Villanova - 40

**Q. Christyn, congratulations on your MOP award. I don't think anyone would have been surprised if any of the ladies to your right received it. Could you talk about the balance on your team and how the adversity you faced this year necessitated that?**

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: They could have easily gotten it as well, like you said. Just throughout the season a lot of our guys had to step up in one place or another.

I feel like we're used to stepping up when we need to. And I feel like we're just playing our best basketball right now and we're firing on all cylinders. I think that's really good for us moving forward.

**Q. Christyn, this is four years in a row you've made a conference all-tournament team, first one since Breanna Stewart to do that in a short list of players who have made it four years in a row, all-conference tournament. How important is it to you to play well in the postseason, how much pride do you take in it, and how do you plan taking it to the next level for the NCAA Tournament?**

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Wow, that's pretty cool. I didn't know that. But yeah, it's very important for me to step it up in the postseason, just because we're really close to our ultimate goal that we're trying to achieve and that we've been working all year for.

So the intensity goes up, and I'm just trying to be as aggressive as I can and just keep it going throughout the

rest of the season.

**Q. Aaliyah, it seems like when you all are on defense and you've been on fire defensively, you have no problem switching on the guards -- Christyn switching on the bigs. Could you talk about the defensive mentality of this team right now, being able to switch all five players and do it in an efficient manner?**

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah, we're pretty efficient on defense. That's what we hold ourselves to. Being able to switch 1 through 5 is very impactful. And it also shows how aggressive we can be on defense, which can lead to our offensive aggression as well.

**Q. Evina, where do you think the biggest areas of growth for this team have been either basketball-wise or just more mentally from the beginning of the season to now when you guys are being crowned champions?**

EVINA WESTBROOK: I think the biggest aspect of growth we've had is just how far we've come with our adversity, everything that we've been hit with on and off the court. And just now getting to start to have everyone back is a really good feeling. And you can kind of tell in the way we play.

But I think everything that we've been hit with this year, this team has handled it really well. We went through a stretch where we're so used to being hit with something. When we weren't, it felt weird. So I think we've handled it pretty well. And it's prepared us for times like this when it's going to get tough.

**Q. Aaliyah, can you pinpoint exactly when or where or if there was any one turning point for you this season where you kind of started playing better and started playing much more like the player that you were last year?**

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I think for me is the Tennessee game, around that time. We were going -- it was maybe about three weeks into the rest of our season. I may not have been producing as well as I know I can.



But going into the end of the season, I just knew I had to be more impactful and aggressive for my teammates and to carry that over into the postseason.

**Q. Christyn, you said this was your favorite Big East Tournament or conference tournament title win. What made it so special? Why was this your favorite?**

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: This is my favorite because this team has gone through so much over the course of this season, like E said, on and off the court. And we had to work so hard to get to where we are right now.

So this one just feels really good. And I'm just super proud to call these girls my teammates and my sisters, and I'm just super proud of my team.

**Q. This is for all three of you. Last year when you won this tournament in this building, there were zero fans in here. How special was it to win this in front of all of these fans in this building. I know it was a pro-UConn crowd because UC being so geographically close. But speak to how special it was celebrating this championship with people here compared to it being desolate last year?**

EVINA WESTBROOK: I think we kind of talked about it when we were on stage. Like you said, last year, we were celebrating by ourselves, but we're kind of used to it going through the COVID stuff throughout the year. But this year them putting a stage out and things like that, we're, like, oh, my gosh, this is what a real celebration looks like.

Our fans and cheering, all that, it felt really good, something that we weren't used to as a team, this team now. So it was really cool to experience for the first time together, this team, speaking of. But it was different, but it was really, really good.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: For me, being a sophomore, like last year, my first year was more, like, bubble and COVID and all that. But to experience this with my teammates, it was a great feeling, being on that stage together, celebrating and having just the crowd embrace us and feel that energy that we would embrace within ourselves was great.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: For me, it was back to normal. Last year was very different and something that I wasn't used to, but the freshman and sophomore class never experienced a big crowd and stuff. So, I was happy they got to experience that. And the crowd was great the entire weekend. So that was cool.

**Q. Evina, obviously you've been playing this game all your life and you're used to being the star of your team; all of you are. How special is it to be on this team and the way players are willing to sit for each other and play maybe a lesser role than they're used to?**

EVINA WESTBROOK: I think it's pretty special. And honestly, it's kind of fun to play like that, when you have whatever five are out there, and then subs are coming in, and it's, like, it's not really like you can relax on who, for the other team, they can't relax on who we've got coming in, because everyone is really dangerous.

So it feels good and it's different. But I think it just really prepares you for the next level as well, having to adjust. And you're not going to be the star player on every team you play on. You're not going to have the same role.

To be able to adjust and sacrifice things for your team, especially this team is kind of easy because we all love each other. It's kind of easy in that aspect.

At the same time, everyone wants to play, everyone wants to contribute, whether it's on the court or on the bench. The bench is a huge contributor to our energy as well. Everyone knows their role. Everyone plays their part. And it's been really fun.

**Q. This is for all three of you. What type -- Villanova talked about a revenge factor they were concerned about. Did you guys talk about the fact that they had beaten you and it was one of those things where you just wanted to stop that part of it?**

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Yeah, that was a factor. When they beat us, that one hurt. Obviously we were coming out with a chip on our shoulder. We didn't want to lose again to them. So we just came out hard and played our best. And we just had our foot on the gas the entire game and we didn't take it off.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: For sure, what Christyn said, that was a big factor. We just knew we had to come out with more intensity and come out better than we did last game.

EVINA WESTBROOK: I think all of us knew, in the locker room, before the game, that it was going to be a totally different game than it was the first time. Like we all knew, it didn't really need to be said. I think it was a matter of us coming out there and putting it together.

And I think what else drove us, when the band, their band yesterday was saying they want UConn, so we was, like, you're all going to get UConn.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Right.

**Q. Coach said yesterday that this team finally, in the last month or so, feels like the UConn of old. Now, you guys have talked about the pressures of trying to live up to that and everybody coming after you. Can you just talk about what it feels like to be that "UConn of old" and to be playing as well as you guys are right now and living up to that standard?**

EVINA WESTBROOK: I think none of us had really understood what it meant to play UConn basketball. But when Coach said that to us yesterday, I think it all made us feel really good because this is really fun basketball to play, how we've been playing and the style we've been playing -- the energy level, the confidence that this team has, it feels amazing.

You kind of understand why UConn has been successful. If this is UConn basketball, the way we've been playing. I'm so happy that we figured it out and we're figuring it out at the right time.

**Q. Aaliyah made it difficult for you to take her off the floor tonight. Can you just address how much energy she brought. She came out to a standing ovation. She was fun to watch play tonight.**

COACH AURIEMMA: Yeah, true. When you have choices, you sometimes feel like you have to use all those choices. But just because you have choices, that doesn't mean you're just going to use them just to use them. You still have to go with what works.

And Aaliyah, this whole tournament, was a real disrupting factor defensively and rebounding-wise. And she just gives us something that Dorka and Liv don't. They give us something that Aaliyah doesn't. So it's a great combination of the three. And you've just got to go with which one has got it going that particular time. She had it going this whole tournament.

**Q. Talk about how locked in the defense has been, it seems, the last month. I think you've held seven of the last eight to under 50 points. Seemed like you guys were locked in. The second half is how important is it to have 10 days or so to get Paige even more healthy and more in rhythm for you guys?**

COACH AURIEMMA: The point I made about these guys having to learn how to play UConn basketball, last year, the year before that, the year before that, her defense was pretty good. But it was pretty good in spite of themselves. They didn't really commit themselves to wanting to be that

good. They had a passing interest in playing defense.

And the more I harped on it and the more mad I got -- how could you not understand that? How could you not understand that this is how you win championships here at UConn, you know? And it took a long time.

This group finally did get it. And I do think Nika had a lot to do with that, for sure. And Aaliyah had a lot to do with that. Younger guys, Azzi is a good defender.

It's funny how when you have a bunch of really good offensive players on your team, how all the other offensive players all of a sudden fall in love with defense. It's weird, right? When they know you've got nowhere to go, but then when they know, that's always been our philosophy here at UConn -- recruit guys who can score. And then the ones who play defense play, and the ones that don't, don't. And now these guys have finally figured that out.

**Q. Paige?**

COACH AURIEMMA: Yeah, I'm glad we have these ten days, 11 days, whatever it is. She's got a lot of work to do. She has her good days. She has her bad days. She has her good days mentally. She has her bad days mentally.

And my big thing is, yeah, get her physically feeling better. But I think she has to get her mind right now because she hasn't been in that mode for three months, whatever it is now. So that's going to be job number one the next 10, 11 days. And Paige being Paige, she'll just be super cooperative.

**Q. You've won 27 conference championships. And I know they're all unique in their own way and rewarding in different ways. Is this one particularly rewarding given what the team has been through and what we've all discussed with you for the last couple of months?**

COACH AURIEMMA: Yeah, I mentioned to them afterwards, in the locker room, that it takes a lot to get to this point, right? You start playing in November and you have a goal to win the regular season. And then you've got to prove it again over the course of three days.

And by the time tonight comes around, whether you win or lose, you're completely drained of everything if you did it right. If you did it right, there's really nothing left that you can give.

And I think that's the feeling that was there today, tonight, that there's really nothing left in the tank for these guys. And yet they found time to celebrate and enjoy and have fun.

They enjoy the competition. They hate practice but they enjoy the competition. They love to compete. And when you have this many young players and you have all the stuff that's going on, with COVID and the injuries and everybody missing games, to have everybody there at one time to be able to participate and celebrate, this one was a lot of fun.

And you beat a team that is really, really hard to play against. People don't realize how hard it is to play against Villanova. I've known that for 37 years.

They're much harder to play now than when Harry was coaching. Denise, she's got these guys playing -- and Maddy Siegrist, I think, is probably one of the top 10 players in the country. We haven't played against 10 players better than her. And I don't think we've played against 10, 15 teams max, better than Villanova.

Whoever said they're one of the first four out, I'd like to see some team that finishes seventh in a Power Five conference play them in the first round. I would pay to see that.

**Q. Last year, after winning, you talked about just how fun that was with having such a young freshman class and being able to do that again this year with that youth, but what they've also been able to grow and learn in the time and be able to win this one again.**

COACH AURIEMMA: Every championship brings a new trophy to a kid who has never had one. I think sometimes people think that it gets run of the mill, whatever number you used, like 27 or whatever.

I always come back to this. It's not 27 for Azzi. It's not 27 for Caroline. It's not 27 for Aaliyah and all the other young players. And to be able to do it without having to rely on Paige, I think that was really impactful for them, how they felt, because there was this perception early on at one point that without Paige we're not very good. You know?

The next coach who doesn't know shit about anything said that recently. And I think we proved her wrong, that without Paige we don't have any good players.

**Q. You touched on it about Villanova. If you wouldn't mind, would you assess, though, the Big East because sometimes I wonder if it gets the respect it deserves. Could you say a few words about that?**

COACH AURIEMMA: Well, if you're in a conference where you could finish seventh, with a .500 record, why would you want to give our conference any respect to a team that

has won 20 out of 22? They might take your spot.

So there's a self-preservation thing that some of these other schools have, other conferences have. And I've been through it before. I was a part of this conference for a long, long time. We're not where we need to be. Anybody who thinks we are is fooling themselves. We're not where we need to be. We're not where they think we are either, though. But we're not where we need to be. I think the coaches know that.

And I think the quality of play is only going to get better and better. And if you look at us and, I'll just say specifically, Villanova and Creighton, what they've done -- Seton Hall to some extent, the way they're playing now -- the problem you have in our league, everybody beats everybody. It makes them look like they're not very good. And some other conferences, man, look at how strong the conference is. Everybody beats everybody.

So I think us being Connecticut, I'd like to be at the forefront of that and say to some of these other conferences, why don't you play us twice every year like these teams do and let's see how you do. And it prepares them for whatever they're going to see.

I'll be really disappointed if Villanova is not in the tournament. I guess Creighton is because they deserve it. Some of the other teams played their way out of it, maybe.

But Villanova's played their way into it. And they have a great style of play. They're fun to watch. And I think they should be in because there's going to be some leagues that are going to get two that deserve one. And we deserve three. I thought we had it at four for a while. And then our league is so bad that we started beating each other and knocked a couple teams out, right?

**Q. You said prior to the tournament when talking about how difficult it was to balance all the minutes that what you hoped in the postseason was that you got a lot of success, played really well without having to rely on one player. How satisfying is it the way you played this tournament, nobody scored over 16 points in a game?**

COACH AURIEMMA: I would like for somebody to get 20 and then everybody else fill in, somebody that you can count on to get 20 every night. But the next best thing to that is have eight or nine guys all get between eight and 16, whatever.

We have players that bring different things to the table, and -- you've been following us all year -- there's been games where two players scored in the 20s and everybody else

had five. And we had to figure out a way to win with just those two players. And that's happened a lot.

And then there were games where if Caroline didn't get 20 we wouldn't win. And then we play games where if Azzi didn't get 25, we wouldn't win.

So we've already been down that road and now I think we're more team-oriented than individual-oriented. We don't have to say, hey, we need these two guys tonight or we're going to lose. People have confidence that if -- you know, Azzi had a really bad night yesterday shooting the ball. But today she shot it better. So I like where we are. I like where we are right now.

**Q. After the South Carolina loss, the big focus for you all -- or for the coaching staff was to make the team mentally tougher. And I'm just curious where they're at right now -- or after this tournament and going into the next one?**

COACH AURIEMMA: The South Carolina game, I think, it was so early in the season. And I knew that our young players were not going to play well. I just knew it. But I was hoping that our older guys would play great. And neither thing happened.

The older guys didn't play great. And the young guys hardly played and played poorly when they did play. And the way that fourth quarter was played, I truly believe that if we don't fix that, then our chances of winning anything, even this tournament, were going to be slim.

And when we came back, we tried to instill in them a little bit of a, more of a toughness, more of a being able to handle punches better. But we did the same thing against Louisville.

So it was something that took us a while to figure out that the fourth quarter is when the games are going to be decided. They're not all going to be 30-point games at halftime. And at practice, things started to get better.

But players being players today, they have short memories. They don't remember stuff. Who was in the Final Four? Anybody remember that? Got a chip on my shoulder going to next year.

It will last until, like, April 8th. Hey, how did you guys do in the Final Four? I don't remember. They have short memories and you just have to keep reminding them, reminding them. And the best way to remind them is have a lot of games in a row where they have to (taps fingers on table) -- and that's the way the schedule fell for us.

So I'm proud of them. Jamelle told me I should trust my team, and I did today. And they rewarded us. So I'm really proud of them.

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