

Big East Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 5, 2023

Uncasville, Connecticut, USA

Mohegan Sun Arena

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Aaliyah Edwards

Nika Muhl

Postgame Media Conference



What was the difference today from that game?

NIKA MUHL: That game was definitely on our minds, especially me personally. Coming into this game we knew they were a physical team. They're disciplined. They're well-coached. We knew who we were up against. We play them twice in the year.

So it was on our minds, I'm not going to lie. I remember them celebrating after they won against us. And I definitely feel like we brought that in our minds with us to the game today and it definitely showed.

I feel like we punched them. They sort of punched us back, but we kept punching throughout the game, and we won.

Q. The two regular-season games Marquette pretty much controlled tempo. I think you guys scored 61 and 52. What was different today that you guys were able to play at a tempo you wanted and a pace you wanted?

NIKA MUHL: I feel what was different today was that it's March and it's not any other month in the year. It's just March. And Coach keeps emphasizing it in practice: We're a different team in March. We highly believe it. And we believe in ourselves.

And today's energy, today's edge we brought was amazing. And I'm proud of my team. And as I said we'll just keep bringing it even more and more.

Q. Marquette went on an 8-0 run to cut it down to five about halfway through the second quarter. From a player's perspective, what do you think really changed for you to go on the run you went on to turn a five-point game into a 15-point game heading into the locker room?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I think it just comes down to not letting up. We knew they could go on their run, but we knew we were in control of the game. We let them have their punch, but as Nika said, we just punched back.

Connecticut - 81, Marquette - 52

Q. Aaliyah, you and Dorka had double-doubles for the second consecutive night. I think it was 48 to eight, points in the paint. Could you talk about how important the inside game has been during this tournament and you guys turning it up there?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: It's been very important for us to kind of dominate the paint. I think that Dorka, me and Aubrey really did well on the boards, and just converting down low. I think that our teammates did well finding us and we were able to put the ball in. I think we just need to continue this for tomorrow and throughout March.

Q. Nika, Marquette coach Megan Duffy said in her opening statement she feels like she just met the UConn team of March. Do you think there's a difference in you guys, you just refocused or picked up intensity, especially defensively?

NIKA MUHL: I felt like today's game pretty much felt much like the games throughout the beginning of the season, the non-conference games. We definitely have a different edge to us when March comes, when the games really, really matter.

So I think our energy was great today. Our defense was amazing. And we're just going to continue to keep that up because now every game matters.

Q. Nika, how much was the last game against Marquette on your minds collectively, or you individually, today? And what was really the difference? I know Azzi and Caroline only played a few minutes today, but it's basically the same people.



And going back to just being more disciplined on defense. I think we just locked in defensively, tried to disrupt them in their offensive flow so it could turn into our transition points.

Q. Having 10 players available to you guys over these last two games, it was just the third time you guys have had that all season, how re-energizing is that for you? How much of a relief has that been to know you guys are more complete now?

NIKA MUHL: It feels amazing knowing that you have people to come off the bench and just give you a little break. I feel like that's a huge relief for us. And I feel like people that have been playing for most of the season have so much -- what is that? We build up, like, our confidence and stamina and conditioning.

So you know we just have so much energy. And I feel like that showed today. Now we can go all in. We don't have to save ourselves no bit. People can be aggressive. There's people that can come in for them if they foul too much.

So it's amazing. And I feel like 10 players available at the right time.

Q. We asked Aaliyah this yesterday -- she won most improved player in the Big East. Where do you see her biggest improvement from last year to this year?

NIKA MUHL: I mean just in every field basketball-wise possible -- points, rebounds, hustle plays. I mean, she has been this player the whole time. She just didn't show it. So I feel like she now has so much confidence.

I see her in the gym working every day. She's the hardest worker; she's in the gym the most. She comes early, works every day on off days. So nothing surprising, nothing that nobody was expecting of her. We all knew that she was capable of doing all this.

And just her leadership, her vocal skills, everything. She's just a complete player, and she's finally -- I'm so proud of her that she's finally able to showcase it. And she's been huge for us, especially tonight.

Q. Couple weeks ago Tristen Newton had 12 assists in a game. And one of his teammates commented that he was playing like Nika Muhl. I wondered if you heard of that, what you thought of that? If you know Tristen, what your reaction was to that?

NIKA MUHL: It was a really nice compliment. I really appreciate that. I wish them all the good luck in their tournament.

Q. Less than a month ago you guys lost to Marquette on the road in a game where you said fatigue of the season really had caught up to you guys. To have this dominant wire-to-wire victory over that same opponent, how re-energized you guys have looked these last two games, how different of a spot is your team in now than it was at that point in February when you lost to Marquette?

COACH AURIEMMA: That was probably the lowest point of our season. Those couple of days leading up to the Marquette game, it was difficult. The energy level that we normally have, and it starts with Nika, and she didn't have it.

So those two days leading up to Marquette, Monday, Tuesday, there wasn't that normal fire in her. And the rest of the team, they felt it as well.

And when the game got off to a pretty good start to us and we thought, well, hopefully this will be an easy game and we won't have to grind it out and play 40 minutes of physical basketball after what we'd just been through with South Carolina, and when the game turned into that, I think we were shot.

But that's on the road, in February. So there's games in February. There's games in January. And then there's games in March. And I don't get too excited about games in February. I worry more about are we getting better so we can be really good in March. And that's been kind of the philosophy around here for a lot of years.

We put together a schedule that will guarantee that we lose and some years that we won't. But it's not because we didn't schedule teams to lose.

So you get to March, it's not the same. That's all there is to it. It's not the same. Playing a regular-season game in February, that's one thing. Playing a tournament game in March, that's a whole different mindset that you have to have. And you almost have to have two kinds of teams on your team -- on your own team you have to have almost two kinds of teams; you have to have a regular-season team and you have to have a tournament team.

Q. Aubrey Griffin seemed to do everything for you today -- scoring, rebounding, stealing. Can you tell us how her playing like that changes the dynamic on your team?

COACH AURIEMMA: No question. The big question is when is the next time we're going to see that Aubrey. If it's tomorrow, then whoever we're playing is going to be in a

tough spot because when Aubrey is like that, there really isn't much on the basketball court that she can't get accomplished.

And she impacts the game at every level. And hopefully her confidence level is really high right now. I haven't talked to her about this specifically, but sometimes when you have alternatives, and the kid knows, hey, look, if I struggle a little bit I can come out, get my bearings and then go back in. Whereas when we didn't have any options, she's out there on an island playing poorly and it just gets worse and worse and worse.

I think her mind is in the right place right now. If we can get that from her, the rest of this tournament and beyond, we're a completely different team, completely different.

Q. Two strong performances in this tournament. It was just six days ago when you seemed to have some pretty deep concern for where things were headed and some criticism of yourself, of your staff, of your team in general. Maybe you've already touched on this theme in your previous answer but what's changed this week for you? Is it more than just recognizing the moment?

COACH AURIEMMA: It's mostly that. It's each team is different. There have been times when we finished the regular season on a high and go into the Big East Tournament on a high and roll right through it.

I thought this past Monday -- I guess I just needed to vent that I was tired of using the excuse of being tired. You know? That the team was tired. That we're mentally fatigued and we're physically fatigued and we play too many minutes and this and that.

And I wanted to get that out there for the team so that that's it, that's the last time we're discussing that; that's the last time we're using that.

And practices -- you know, we didn't have many of them -- practices were a little bit different leading up to this tournament. We may have been guilty throughout the season in that we're treating them like they're fragile because they are. Every time somebody falls down in practice you start to go oh, boy, there goes another one.

I think after the Xavier game we took a couple of days off. And when we came back it's like it's back to the old days, going to the mattresses -- back to the old days.

Q. Double-double for Nika, 400 career assists today. We always know how tough you are on your point guards, but how tough is Nika on you?

COACH AURIEMMA: How tough is she on me? Not as much as freshman year and last year. I think them coming in in a bubble year was really, really difficult for everybody.

And I can be tough on her because she wants that. She appreciates that. She responds to that. She is confident enough in who she is to tell me exactly where she is relative to me. This is what I think she says.

And I like our point guards to be like that because it's supposed to be a collaboration. It's not supposed to be, I say this, you do that. It's supposed to be this is what I want, now you tell me how you're going to get it and then you're going to tell me why you didn't get it or what we need to do different to get it, not just say, yes, Coach, yes, Coach, yes, Coach.

She's not that. And I appreciate that about her. And each day she's becoming a little bit easier to coach. She's less hard on herself. So I've really enjoyed this year with Nika. And I hope we have a long run in the NCAA Tournament because she's a feisty kid who never wants to stop fighting. She never wants to stop competing.

She didn't have to have an offensive foul on that kid today underneath the basket. She already had the layup. But that was a classic Shea Ralph move. Drive here, I could just shoot a layup, but, you know what? It won't be as much fun unless I whack this kid. That's just some people are like that. What can I tell you?

Q. With all these qualities you've talked about with Nika and the difference between March and other months, other games, is she maybe uniquely built for this? Is she made for that difference between March and the rest of the season?

COACH AURIEMMA: Some people are. Some people are. Nika has more confidence than game. Like there's things that she thinks she can do on the basketball court that she can't do. But she doesn't know that and doesn't care.

So her confidence level is, I can do anything on that basketball court. And the bigger the game, the bigger the moment, the more pressure doesn't faze her one bit. So if you have a leader like that on your team that does rub off on the rest of the players, you know -- she's running out of the tunnel and you're following her, that's a pretty good person to follow into what's coming next.

Q. You almost scored more in the paint today than Marquette did in total and you had another dominant game in the paint yesterday. When you think about

how much players are sticking to Lou Lopez, (indiscernible) closer on the 3-point line, other players in general, how important is it for your team to continue this dominance heading into March?

COACH AURIEMMA: We need one or the other, preferably both. So we either have to be a terrific 3-point shooting team, like we were in November -- I think we were number one in the country for the longest time, November, December; I can't imagine we're still there now. And I said we have to score more in the lane or it's going to catch up to us.

And I think they're both related in a way that the threat of us scoring in the lane gives us more 3s. And scoring in the lane allows us to play any way we want, actually, because not every shot that Lou or Azzi or Nika or anybody takes now is life and death. We're going to get that rebound. We're going to get a bucket and a foul.

So it just cleans up a lot of stuff when -- and I explained it to the players. Everybody always talks about how important guards are in basketball, including me. I always say you can always play with five guards but you can't play with five post players. And you see around the world, the game is changing and people are playing more with players that don't have a position.

But at the same time, the game as it's played here in college, still you have to have a tremendous presence in the lane at both ends of the floor. And today that's exactly what we did. We didn't let them have anything in the lane like they had the first two times they played us.

And we got whatever we wanted in the lane against them. So when you're doing that to people, it's kind of demoralizing a little bit because they don't want to have to go in there and trap and leave Azzi and Lou open.

So it was just an all-around great performance by Aubrey, Aaliyah and Dorca, especially, the three of them. They were terrific.

Q. Could you talk about the defensive intensity of your team -- blocked shots, steals? Really the last couple of days they've been on point.

COACH AURIEMMA: You watch enough basketball, and you realize that the best team in the country is going to struggle against an average team in the country if they walk the ball up the floor every possession and the final score is going to be 60-55.

So how do you create opportunities for yourself that don't require the grind of every screen, every cut, every pass is

contested? I think you have to force some turnovers. You have to play great defense and you have to control the boards. And then you need a point guard that pushes the ball up the floor.

So all of our offense, all those 81 points came almost directly off of what we were doing defensively. And that wasn't the case towards the end of the season with everybody. That's why our point production went way down. We went from being in the 80s all the time to then we're down in the 60s for six or seven games or whatever it was.

That's because we weren't making anything happen on the defensive end. And that's been a big difference the last two days.

Q. Can you give us an update on Azzi and Caroline? And are you going to have to manage their minutes coming up the rest of March, or tomorrow, or at all?

COACH AURIEMMA: I don't plan to. Unless somebody tells me I have to, I don't plan on it. I think these first two days were mainly, let's get back in the swing of things for Azzi. She could have played more minutes today, and maybe if the game was closer. But I just wanted her to get enough, just enough, and then add maybe a little bit more tomorrow so that when the NCAA Tournament comes around it's not the first time she would have to play 30 minutes.

And what really helps is if Aubrey plays the way she did today that gives us the luxury of managing that even better.

And with Carol, you know, getting hit yesterday, it all depended this morning on how you're feeling, and she said she felt pretty good and gave it a shot. And we'll see how she is tomorrow. But I would expect by NCAA Tournament time she's going to be just like everybody else, whatever minutes we need, her to play, she'll play.

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