

# Big East Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 9, 2024

Uncasville, Connecticut, USA

Mohegan Sun Arena

**UConn Huskies**

**Coach Geno Auriemma**

**KK Arnold**

**Paige Bueckers**

Postgame Media Conference



Connecticut 86, Providence 53

THE MODERATOR: Joining us from UConn head Coach Geno Auriemma, student-athletes Paige Bueckers and KK Arnold. We'll begin with an opening statement from Coach.

GENO AURIEMMA: One of the things that we talk about at this time of the year is that it's very difficult to win in March. Doesn't matter what the matchup is. Doesn't matter what the records are. It's just very, very difficult to win in March.

We pride ourselves in being able to handle pretty much anything that comes along. You get to experience everything over the course of a season, those five months or whatever. And then today when Aaliyah went down, it was just one more thing that was thrown at us. And the way we responded that second half and how our players performed, I thought was tremendous.

I think we showed a lot of maturity during that stretch and a lot of toughness and a lot of character. Because they're out there playing, and you know you're not coming out. That's a tough way to play basketball and know that I'm not going to get a breather no matter what.

I was really, really happy with these guys. I wish we had a couple of days between games, but unfortunately, we've got to get ready for tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Paige, can you just talk about that, how you guys responded and what the feelings were? You just looked very focused after that happened? Not only how the whole team responded, but Ice in particular?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, once Aaliyah went down, we kind of called a huddle, and we were talking about how locked in we have to be, how extra focused we're going to have to be stepping in for Aaliyah who does so much for us, particularly rebounding. Aaliyah does a great job on the boards, so we knew that was a hole that we needed to fill.

Ice, I thought she came in and gave great minutes. Her resilience and her ability to step up to the plate when we needed her when her number was called, and she was really fearless in that. I thought she rebounded well. She defended well. She did great things on offense, rebound, screening, knocking in shots.

Just the way she responded was honestly really perfect. But just again, like everybody just was major focused and major locked in. We knew we had to step it up for Aaliyah.

**Q. Also for Paige, what was it like to see KK really step up in her first postseason game?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, it was huge. She took over the game at some parts and just completely dominated, whether it be offensively, defensively, the pressure that she put on the ball, getting in passing lanes, getting tips, steals, rebounds.

So she affected the game in every aspect, and she completely took it over and was aggressive. Along with Ice, stepped up huge when Aaliyah went down and was a huge reason for that run we went on.

**Q. Your defense helped you see to eight points in the last quarter and you held them to -- their shooters weren't shooting well. How did you limit their abilities?**

KK ARNOLD: Just communication on the defensive end, really honing in on that part. I say the first half we didn't do a bad job, but we could have did better. The second half we really honed in on communication and knowing where the shooters are in specific areas to limit their shots would help us down the road in the game.



**Q. Paige, you outscored them 45-18 after Aaliyah went down. When she came back from the locker room, what did that mean to your team, and did she say anything to you afterwards?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah. Just to see that she was okay. She was standing up on both feet. And having her back out there is just huge for the presence of the team. I mean, we all checked on her to make sure she was good. I think we'll know more later, but it was her nose that got hit.

Yeah, just to have her out there, just to see that she's okay was huge.

**Q. KK, we saw you get a little bit fired up after a couple of those and-ones and things. What was the atmosphere like of your first postseason game? Did it feel different from how the regular season has felt for you?**

KK ARNOLD: I would say in terms of it felt really different just because it's my first Big East tournament, coming in, the atmosphere, crowd, everybody in tune. But I really couldn't be more grateful for this team in the first game. We have two more to go, but this is just a really good atmosphere to play in. For my first time, like I said, it was very exciting.

**Q. KK, you were really aggressive on the ball defensively. What's your mentality when you are taking that first assignment on the point?**

KK ARNOLD: Just basically not letting the ball -- not letting them set up the offense. Really just disrupt them and don't let them, like I said, run their offense, because that creates them getting settled in. Getting that disruption helps us on the offensive end as well, pushing the ball, getting to our layups, transition, and everything.

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse Paige and KK. Thank you, ladies.

GENO AURIEMMA: Plus, that one steal was huge.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

**Q. Geno, what did you say to them after Aaliyah went down after everything you've been through this season, what did you like about the response, again, 45-18 after that?**

GENO AURIEMMA: It's just been numbing for us to the point where there really wasn't much that you could say other than this is it. This is what we've got.

We talked a lot about some of these young guys have to grow up and they have to grow up fast, and they did. You don't know until you're put in that situation what you can do. Sometimes you're put in situations where you have no choice, which I kind of love that because it brings out the best of you, the best in all of us, when you're thinking well, somebody will come off the bench and pick me up, give me a breather. No, it's all on you.

And it's a lot, but it gives you an opportunity to show what you've got.

**Q. Obviously there's a lot of legends that you could have honored as a Big East Legend, and you chose Laura. Just curious about why she was selected and what she meant for the program.**

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, we tried to start at the beginning, you know. This is the first time they've done this, which I think is a great, great thing. There certainly have been a lot of legends in this league over the years. In my mind, there were two to choose from, and I thought Laura was probably at the time the most important recruit that we got when I first got here.

She took our program from nothing and helped us go to the Final Four her senior year. I just thought it was very appropriate for a Connecticut kid to be honored as a legend.

**Q. Yesterday Doug Bruno talked about how after all this time, he still loved coaching. I was curious if you could speak to what you still love about coaching after almost four decades at the helm?**

GENO AURIEMMA: I like dinners after we win. I like days off after we're three games in a row. I like all the things that happen when you get to enjoy some of your success and join time with your staff.

It's not about the wins anymore because the wins are the wins. If you keep chasing wins, you're going to chase them until you die. You're not chasing wins. You're chasing championships.

We got after our players pretty good at halftime because I thought we were trying to do two things. We were trying to beat Providence and beat ourselves. It's hard to beat two teams in one night, in one afternoon.

So we got after our players pretty good at halftime, and they came out. After that initial, what looked like it was going to be more of the same to start the second half, the way -- like Paige said, the way we locked in. I like the fact

that today players found out that they've got something in them maybe that they weren't quite sure they had. We helped them get that.

To me that's still the essence of coaching, right? Being able to get your players to find inside of them some things that are there, but they need some impetus to go find it. That never gets old. Never.

Gets harder every year, but it doesn't get old.

**Q. KK Arnold, just how dynamic she can be on both ends of the floor. What will that do for you guys in the postseason if she can consistently do this for you?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I think that's -- to me that's the big thing. Nika didn't have one of her best performances today. She struggled a little bit in this game.

But KK is able to have that kind of impact on our team. There's an attitude or there's something about her that's somewhat infectious. It's somewhat galvanizing when you get somebody like that that makes a big play at the defensive end, then comes down and makes a big play at the offensive end, and you can see the entire team get lifted.

You're always worried about your freshmen and how they're going to behave in their first time in this environment. She really was tremendous today in every facet of the game.

**Q. Ice had three fouls in seven minutes in the first half and then came out and responded really well in the second. What do you think about her response?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, she's one of the ones I'm talking about that she probably most of this year treats herself like, well, you know, if I don't have it, Aaliyah will do it. I'm just here to kind of give everybody a breather and then if I'm good, I'm good. If I'm not any good, that's okay. We're going to win anyway.

When you think like that, you get careless and sloppy, and you don't put enough pressure on yourself to get it right.

I think once Aaliyah got hurt, I think the light went off and she looked around and went, there is no other option. I'm the only option. I wish she would treat herself like that more often and play with that kind of mindset. Well, certainly we're going to need her now, depending on what happens with Aaliyah, you know.

But there's a learning curve to playing college basketball and certainly to playing at UConn. Some kids get it right

away, and others it takes a little bit of time. I think she grew up a little bit today. Hopefully there's carry-over tomorrow.

**Q. Two things. First of all, what is the status of Aaliyah. And then, secondly, can you just talk about Nika announcing today that she won't be back next year?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, she might have forgot that she's still here. We still needed three more days out of her at least.

But I think that was always Nika's plan. I don't think there was ever a doubt how she wants her career to end and how she wants it to go. She has aspirations for the future, and I think it's the right time for her to go on to the next thing.

As far as Aaliyah is concerned, our team doctors are here. They'll do some tests afterwards. Judging by the looks of it, her nose looks like it's been through a fight. So what that means for the rest of the tournament, I don't know. We'll probably know by sometime this evening for sure.

**Q. Paige led you guys in just about every category today. I mean, you've talked a lot about the pressure that she is under. I guess just what allows her to rise to that time and time again, especially in a high-pressure situation already like this?**

GENO AURIEMMA: I remember Diana said something like this quite recently, actually, when someone asked her about her ability to perform in knock-out games and those pressure situations. She made a great comment. She said, I don't feel any pressure. I don't feel anything because I spend a lot of time preparing for these moments, so when they do come, for me it's just natural.

I think Paige is kind of in that mold. She spends a lot of time preparing for these moments. She's very much invested in the game. She's not somebody that just shows up, plays, and goes home. She's very, very invested. She believes in herself. She has tremendous belief in herself. Tremendous confidence in herself and expects to do well in these situations. Just like some people expect to miss, she expects to conquer every situation.

For kids out there watching, yes, it's talent and, yes, it's preparation and putting the time in. But there's nothing that can replace the belief that you have in yourself that you were born for this and you prepared for this moment. So we're fortunate that we have -- because you're not going anywhere without somebody like that.

I remember somebody saying to me one time, the only time you guys win is when you have guys like that. I tried winning without guys like that. It doesn't work. Sorry to bust anybody's bubble.

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