

Big East Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 10, 2024

Uncasville, Connecticut, USA

Mohegan Sun Arena

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Paige Bueckers

Ice Brady

Postgame Media Conference



UConn 58, Marquette 29

GENO AURIEMMA: Sometimes you put together an idea, you put together a plan with your team. You think if we can execute some of this plan, we'll be in pretty good shape. We'll give ourselves a chance to win.

Every once in a while, it kind of comes out exactly how you imagined it could come out.

We knew that defensively we needed to play really, really well, and it was even better than I imagined.

Obviously when a score is like that, you need help from the other team, and I think they missed a lot of shots that they normally make, which that's what happens sometimes.

But the way we carried each other was probably the most impressive thing for me. We relied on each other so much.

Obviously Paige did Paige things, but everybody -- today was really a team triumph. It really, really was. It was really special to be a part of this. I wish this was tomorrow. I wish today was Monday. Unfortunately it's not.

Q. Paige, was it your decision to jump? You turned to the team and flexed. What was going on there?

PAIGE BUECKERS: It was sort of a discussion. It wasn't long. I was going to win that discussion. But once we found out Aaliyah wasn't playing, it was either me or Ice, and I'm like, yeah, I got it.

GENO AURIEMMA: Who she jumped against was one of her teammates, and she let her do it.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I don't know if they had the utmost confidence in me like the confidence that I had in myself to win the jump ball, so I just let them know a little bit.

Q. Paige, with Aaliyah out, you obviously knew going into the game that you were going to need to do a little bit more. What was your mindset going into the game and getting your teammates' confidence up?

PAIGE BUECKERS: My mindset really was I was focused on rebounding. With Aaliyah out, that's a huge piece that we're missing. Aaliyah grabs every single rebound that comes off the rim.

Just leading the communication with our group. I thought me and Ice did a really good job of talking on the switches, on when to guard who in the post, try to keep her inside as much, try to keep me outside.

But just communicating, leading by example, leading by passion, leading by the energy that I played with, and just leave it all out on the floor.

We know what we don't have, but we didn't want to focus on that. We wanted to focus on who was on the floor, and we were confident in anybody that we put out there. Just rebounding and communicating was the focus.

Q. Ice, you knew that you would be stepping in today and likely playing the whole game, which you did. How do you prepare for that mentally knowing there is no one else to come in for you?

ICE BRADY: I feel like in practice coaches, teammates, we did a great job of trying to simulate that, going as hard as we can. He talks about the more you run the floor, the better you'll get at that. So that week leading up, I tried to push myself as much. And obviously we didn't expect to not have Aaliyah, but I felt like just preparing definitely paid off, and I felt good out there today.

Q. Your team had a lot of success in the paint this afternoon. Did you see Marquette do anything differently on defense, or did you have to adjust any



offense for you to really get under the rim today?

PAIGE BUECKERS: It was a focus before the game. We're an undersized starting lineup, which has sort of weaknesses on the defensive end. But it makes them if they go big have to -- one of their bigs has to guard one of our guards, so it was a huge emphasis to get in the paint, create, try to attack mismatches. Whoever had the big guy on them and then create from there.

A huge emphasis going into the game was getting into the paint and creating from there.

Q. Paige, the way you guys came out, very aggressive, very disruptive. Even though you couldn't afford to get in foul trouble, it seems like you put them back on their heels right away and they never really recovered from that. Is that what you guys were trying to do, knowing your position, to try to get that and kind of jump them a little bit?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, we wanted to start the game aggressive, sort of set the tone of what rest of the game looked like. But we talked about it in the huddle leading up to the game in the locker room of just how focused and locked in we were going to have to be. Especially, like you said, defensively not getting into foul trouble, but also wanting to disrupt their offense and what they do in their flow.

So I thought just starting the game out like that, sort of setting the tone, I thought we did a great job of that, balancing being aggressive and being smart at the same time.

Q. Ice, Marquette's coach just talked a little bit about your defense today. How much do you feel like you've grown in that aspect of your game, and how did you navigate the matchup with Karlen today?

ICE BRADY: I felt like that was definitely an emphasis leading up to the game with them having two post players, trying to, like we said, navigate that. Lots of film watching, how to read the duck-in, definitely struggled with that, and he gave me a hard time about that, so I made sure that I was locked in.

GENO AURIEMMA: Who is he?

ICE BRADY: I would say definitely an emphasis from the coaches, but doing a great job of watching that film and going over it a lot in practice, making sure that they don't get that position. Because again, once they get it, it's over.

Q. At the beginning of the third quarter yesterday,

Providence made a little bit of a run to get back into the game, but today Marquette didn't really have any response. How did you use the energy coming out of the second half, especially when you hit the buzzer beater at the end of the third quarter?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, learning from yesterday, we wanted to come out and be aggressive. The same way that we started the game, we wanted to start the half that way. Again, set the tone for what the rest of the half was going to look like.

No game is won in the first 20 minutes, so really emphasized that in the locker room that we needed to finish the last 20 minutes and play and leave it all on the court and start that third quarter strong.

Q. Ice, this was only your first postseason, still you second postseason game, what was the best advice either Aaliyah or one of the upperclassmen gave you about what it takes to play at this time of the year?

ICE BRADY: Just being locked in. Everything matters at this point. And I would say not wanting to have this be our last game, go home, and I feel like that really stuck with me.

Whatever I was feeling mentally, if I was frustrated, whatever, there was no time for feelings or anything like that. And just made sure I needed to do whatever I needed to do to make sure our team was locked in, and I feel like we did that.

Teammates did a good job of keeping us all focused on the same goal. And so yeah, just knowing that we have one goal in common, I feel like really helped us just lock in. Whatever mistakes happened happened, and we just moved on and focused on what the task was.

Q. You held them to no points in the fourth quarter, 12 baskets on 54 shots. Can you talk about the defensive effort in this game and the intensity, and what did you think you guys did better in this game than you have all season?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think the biggest thing was the communication, the way we talked, the way we prepared in our shootaround. Marquette is a really disciplined team in the offense that they run. So for us, it was trying to disrupt what they're comfortable with and try to get in passing lanes, deny their shooters. Me and Ice holding the paint down --

GENO AURIEMMA: Holding the paint down...

PAIGE BUECKERS: No, I think the communication was the biggest piece. We knew we didn't have Aaliyah in the paint to get the rebounds to protect us. So we definitely had to lock in extra, communicate extra, and just pay attention to the scout and their tendencies.

Q. Can you describe what it was like to be out there playing that hard for so long? Did you feel momentum? Did you feel the energy? You guys just looked so locked in. What did it feel like?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, from the opening tip, when we went on the 7-0 run to start the game, you just felt the hunger and the passion and the energy that we had.

It helped to get a strong start like that, but it continued throughout the whole entire game because we knew coming in that we had to play a full 40 minutes. Marquette is a great team, and they could go on a run at any point.

Just to have that energy and the passion that we're playing with, it becomes contagious within each other. And anytime Marquette went on a run or we went through a drought, we stayed composed, stayed confident, and just kept playing our game.

Q. Geno, Paige talks about leaving it all out on the court. Can you speak to how -- you've said how competitive she is, but she was crawling on the floor for rebounds and hitting that shot at the end of the third quarter, just how much she did today.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it's remarkable, I think, the way players like Paige can sum it up, exactly what's needed at any given moment, any given game.

To then be able to execute it -- she's one of those unique superstars that wants to be that at both ends of the floor. Not everyone values those same things. She gets a lot of enjoyment out of the rebounding that she can do, the blocked shots, the steals, stealing the inbounds pass on the out-of-bounds play.

She just has a great sense of the game and what's happening next. I think that's probably why she's never surprised, because I think she always knows what's happening next.

Obviously our players feed off of that and they feed off of her. You don't come across players like that very often. We've been fortunate here at Connecticut.

She's different. That's it. She's different. That's evident every time you see her play. And the bigger the game, the more different she becomes. It's hard to explain

sometimes.

Q. You mentioned in your opening statement about it being a team triumph. Can you speak of how and why everyone just communicates so well together on the floor that they seem to always be in the right place at the right time?

GENO AURIEMMA: It's been a real struggle trying to incorporate our veterans with our young players. They're on two different wavelengths a lot of times. Now you've got three of them out there.

They had the majority today. There was three of them. Even if they got it wrong, they were all wrong, so in a sense they were right. The communication was really good today.

We talked about when we left shootaround this morning, we said, the guys that -- there's always guys on the floor that know exactly what's going on. The danger is when they don't say anything. There's always people on the floor that will never know what's going on.

But today, the emphasis was the players that actually know what's going on need to talk, and I mean talk nonstop the entire game. You other guys that don't know anything, you need to listen and just do what they tell you.

Today was about as good an example of that as you can imagine.

Q. Geno, when you drew it up pregame for your team and for Ice, was this about as close as what you expected to get from her today?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah. Yeah. I would say the presence that she has in the lane was going to be a huge factor for us as long as she stayed out of foul trouble and could be that presence in the lane. Then we just had to play around her.

There were a couple times when what happens is -- you know, the way Marquette plays, there's a lot of movement in their offense. And what we didn't want to happen was Ice wandering out on the perimeter to go guard people, which we would let Aaliyah do, but that needed to change today.

We just needed to make sure that the other players were -- like she was kind of hopefully like a bicycle. She was kind of like the hub there, and everyone else tried to play around her and keep her in the spot where she could be most successful. And it worked out about -- there were times at shootaround this morning when I thought we can't

do this. This is not going to be possible. Because they were all looking at each other, like, what are we doing here?

We stayed with it, and we didn't have to deviate from it, which doesn't always work that way. You've got to have a plan B. We did have a plan B. It wasn't very good, but we didn't have to go to it.

Q. What's the last time you remember playing with this effort? You guys have played tremendous games for the last 30 years, but the effort just seemed at another level today where guys were just constantly harassing the ball or hustling back or cutting through people.

GENO AURIEMMA: There have been times. There have been teams that we've had here, those of you that have followed us for a long time, that it wasn't that big a deal when we held somebody to five points in a half. Because we just overwhelmed people with our numbers too. Not just with our talent, but with our numbers, that we were able to keep the pressure on for an entire game.

Today was different in that it had to be that way without the ability to replace you if fatigue set in or foul issues.

To play that hard for that long a period of time without getting a chance to get a breather to me was about as impressive as anything that we've done, not just in this tournament. But it's been a long time since I've seen anything like this when there was that much asked of so few players.

Q. How impressed were you -- everyone is going to see about Ice and Paige and the points they scored, but defensive-wise, you guys were very impressive. On a scale of 1 to 10, how impressed were you with their defense today?

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't know that it could have been any better. It was difficult for them to get the looks that they wanted, and when those looks did materialize, it was a rush for them.

You're in a conference tournament. You're trying to win the tournament. You're playing a team that's a little bit wounded. We get off to the start that we got, it makes it difficult to make shots in that situation because every shot becomes huge.

When you're winning, it's easy to make shots. But I think the fact that we came out the way we did and we kept the pressure on, it made every jump shot, every shot that they took crucial for them. And it's hard to go through a whole game like that, and our defense, we sustained it for an

entire 40 minutes.

Q. Could you share your version of how the discussions went about who would take the jump ball? And more importantly, she wins the tip and then has like a little muscle flex. You guys all seemed to get a chuckle out of it, and then of course she goes and scores right away. What did that sequence, her adding some personality and two points right away, do to set everyone at ease?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it's getting kind of old because she did it down at the other end when she blocked a shot late in the game. Spending time in the weight room all of a sudden, I guess, gives you the feeling that you're Maya Moore now all of a sudden.

But she takes a lot of pride in doing things that maybe people think that she can't do -- and she says so much -- like you're not even privy to any of this, but she says so much. She talks about herself so much in a positive way, this is what I'm going to do. She actually tells them, this is what I'm going to do.

Not in a bad way, it's just nonstop, that when she does it, it's almost like, I told you I was going to do it. It's fun to be around that. But at the same time we're all rooting for her not to get it done so we can make fun of her.

But there's just -- something in her that is -- I can't describe -- because you never know whether it's real or she's putting on a happy face. But there is nothing, literally nothing that she thinks that if she sets her mind to it that she can't do.

Like she ran around the court after that buzzer beater at the end of the third quarter, whatever it was, she knew it was going in. That's how she is. She knew it was going in. But then she likes to celebrate, like I told you so. You don't find kids like that anymore.

First, they don't have the guts to say it before they're going to do it. And then if they do, which it's hard to do, but she's -- yeah. She's different. She's different.

Every kid on the team -- without her, they're not as good. Without her, they're not as good. And they're good. Don't get me wrong. But without her, the pressure on them would be so immense that I'm not sure they'd be able to handle it.

Q. I guess we're dancing around the same topics here, but the way you guys started the game, kind of almost as I mentioned putting them back on their heels, it almost looked like this was the program that was trying to win something for the future time, and they

were the ones that maybe had won a lot of different -- you guys are playing like the underdogs. How do you coach that? How do you bring that out? Is that all Paige? Is that response to the circumstances? How do you get that attitude from the program that's done what you guys have done?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, a couple things happened. One, we did not necessarily plan to play the first five minutes the way we ended up playing. The strategy was a little bit different.

Then right before introductions, we said, how about if we just stick to the way we've been playing, don't change anything, and let's be very, very disruptive, as disruptive as we can.

The initial game plan was we can't be like that because we can't risk the foul problems. But when I said -- I knew what they wanted. So when I said it, they're collectively, yes, that's how we want to play. So we went and just went with our regular routine.

But the thing that was talked about a lot in the locker room, how often does a Connecticut team go into a game where you actually kind of are the underdog? They go, how can you possibly win with five players missing an All-American?

I said, do you know how fortunate you guys are? Connecticut players are never in that situation. I said, but at the same time, we're not the underdog because we're better than them. So I don't want you to think that we're the underdog, but that's the perception that's going to be out there. But we're better than them, and if we play our A game, we're going to win.

Nika said to me at pregame this morning, she goes, I feel really good about today. I'm really confident. I'm not faking, either. She says, I really feel really good about it.

I think that was the -- that kind of permeated the entire team.

Q. Can you give an update on Aaliyah?

GENO AURIEMMA: The swelling and the being able to -- people think you just slap a mask on and you're good to go, but you have to be able to breathe, and you have to not have headaches. No concussions, which was great.

Now it's just a matter of when are you comfortable. Is it tomorrow? I don't know. I doubt it. But who knows.

But I would say by two weeks from yesterday, we'll be good to go. We'll be right back to normal.

Q. Is it broken?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yes. Way broken. It's way broken.

Q. Over the last three years, you've had a lot of one-name stars in Diana, Sue, Maya, Paige. It seems now there's so many now spread across the country of Paige, Caitlin, Angel, JuJu, keep on going. Can you remember a time that their star power is what it is now, spread out across the country and potentially there's probably more on the women's side for the first time than there is on the men's side?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I've always said that, that it's good and bad that the guys get to spend one year in college and then leave, the best ones. But they also don't become household names, and they don't get a chance to create that stardom for themselves. They're here and they're gone. Most of those guys would trade a little bit of stardom for the money that they're going to make.

When all those players that you mentioned were playing, there were a lot of really good players. They happened a lot of times to be on the same team, so now we are spread out more. There were a lot of really good players back then that became WNBA greats, became Hall-of-Famers, Olympians from across the country. There's just never been this much attention paid to women's basketball.

Now it's really, really evident that there's stars out there in this game. Whereas before I think they were there, but nobody wanted to acknowledge it and appreciate it as much. And finally, to your point, they're just really good. Everybody is going around telling everybody how good they are.

They're all visible. It's not just UConn and Tennessee on TV. That's the one game that everybody in America watches. Those kids are on TV a lot. They're in the limelight a lot. They know how to handle it because they're used to it now.

It's going to get even better. So many kids coming out of high school are just unbelievably good. They're not all going to the same schools, unfortunately for me.

Q. We've seen Jana warm up the last couple of days and all that. How is she progressing, and what are you guys hoping to accomplish getting her out there?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, obviously there's a routine to that timetable. Our doctors and our athletic trainers, they've got the menu. Every day, this is where -- and then at this time, how many months, this is what we're going to



do, little by little.

Obviously she's been dying to get out there and do some things.

The more we see her out there, the more we see her running around, the more we see some of the things she does, the more we miss her because we realize what she can bring to our team.

The only unfortunate thing for her is Ramadan starts this week, so she's walking around with bags of food getting ready to stock up. That's the only -- right now, that's the only thing that's on her schedule. Everything else on her schedule is what time is my rehab, what am I allowed to do, what time are my classes. She has no life other than rehab because she wants to play so bad.

I can't wait for people to see her play. She just has a real unique personality that I think people are going to really fall in love with.

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