

Big East Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

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Uncasville, Connecticut, USA

Mohegan Sun Arena

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Paige Bueckers

Nika Mühl

Postgame Media Conference



PAIGE BUECKERS: She's been there for me through everything that I've been there, and I've been there for her whatever she's going through. But this is what makes the game of basketball so special is that we're remembered for what we did on the court, but what us players will take away the most is our relationships and the memories and just the bonds that we've created.

But she makes everything so easy on the court. She's the one that holds us down offensively, defensively, just a solid force every single game. So consistent.

Her and Aaliyah have been our rocks this entire four years that we've been together, just consistency in the lineup. But I'm sad she's leaving. I'm proud to see her go. I know she'll be great wherever she goes, but it's been a real joy to play with Nika and be her teammate.

Q. Paige or Nika, if you could speak to how Ice stepped up over the past couple days and just kind of how you've seen her grow throughout her freshman season.

NIKA MÜHL: Yeah, I don't know where we would be without Ice, especially this tournament. But I'm so, so, so proud of her because only we as a team know how hard-headed she is, how stubborn she is. She's worse than us. Only we as a team know what kind of milestone she accomplished today.

To see her growth, to just be a part of it, I mean, it's amazing. I've never seen that in my life, honestly. She's grown so much over the last couple days, and I'm so happy for her because she's a great player, but sometimes you need to remind her what kind of great player she is. This past three games, she didn't need no reminding, because she knew it, and she stepped up when we needed her the most. And that takes some maturity. That takes some -- that takes everything.

I don't think I would be able to do that in that situation. I'm not strong enough. But she definitely is, and she proved it, and she proved it to herself. Before everybody, I feel like she needed to prove it to herself, and I'm so proud of her.

UConn 78, Georgetown 42

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, obviously these have been three pretty interesting days, to say the least. The energy that it took to finish this off was really pretty remarkable. To see our players summon up that that energy today after what happened yesterday, that took a lot.

Couldn't be prouder of them. They acted like they could have played another 40 minutes if they had to, that they were committed to we're going to do whatever we have to do to win. You could tell by the way we played defensively that that was the case.

Georgetown had an incredible run. Hopefully they're under consideration for an NCAA spot. But given what happened to their coaching staff at the beginning of the season, they had a pretty remarkable year. So congratulations to them.

We're very fortunate that we have these two up here. That makes all the difference in the world.

Q. You got the basket on the assist that Nika moved past Diana Taurasi. Can you tell me what it's been like the last four seasons to play with her, and what's your thought on her pursuit of the assist record? She needs nine more.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Well, she should get it. I was mad, I forgot which game it was, when I didn't get her 500th assist. I'm glad I could do that one today. Playing with Nika has just been a joy. It's kind of unfortunate we didn't get to play together more, but this is like my sister, my twin.

NIKA MÜHL: She don't got to say nothing more.



Q. As you and your teammates watch next Sunday for your seed and placement, how important is this win in bolstering your case to get a good seeding in the big dance, and how far of a run do you feel that you can make?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I think winning this tournament was huge in terms of placement. We want to get the highest seed possible, so winning out was a key emphasis during the regular season.

But I think when we're watching, we'll just -- like we have all season, just go with whatever is thrown at us, go wherever we're seeded at, make the most of it, and hopefully we can get home-court advantage. That's a huge thing that we want to have, being one of the top 4 seeds. That would be great.

But just continue to play UConn basketball, continue to get better at practice these few days before the tournament starts and just focus on becoming a better team will take us how far we want to go in March.

Q. Paige, would you share your thoughts on the topics Coach hit in his opening, what it took emotionally and physically to do what you guys did over the course of these three days, and what does this body of work mean to you?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, it means everything. Just the continuous blows we've taken throughout the entire season, us finding consistency in who we had in our lineups and building chemistry. And then one of our main people gone, Aaliyah, so just again, having to step up, having to roll with the punches, having to adjust.

But honestly having been through so much, we sort of adapt to it every single time it happens to us. Different people step up. We just instilled confidence within each other, within the freshmen. They've never been in this position before.

So just continuing to be in their ears about being confident, how we need them, and go out there and play their game. Just time after time having different people step up and us responding to adversity with resilience and perseverance is sort of what our identity is as a team.

Q. Paige, you talked a little bit out there about what it meant to actually be playing this year instead of sitting on the sideline injured. What does it mean to you to play in the NAAs again healthy for the first time in a couple years? There's so much buzz around this tournament. People are talking about it more than the men's. What does it feel like to see women's

basketball finally getting its due from fans, media, everyone out there?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, very excited to play in the NCAA Tournament. It's what you prepare for your entire life, to shine on the biggest stage.

Super excited that that time is around and I'm able to play and participate in that in a different way than I did last year.

Just with women's basketball, my freshman year, I didn't even know we weren't able to use the term March Madness, and now we are, which is just a testament to the women's game continuing to grow. Big names continue to put up big numbers, and people watching. The media is paying more attention. We're getting more spotlight, I guess, and accessibility to it. A lot of people are tuning in and watching.

I think the tournament will be great, just on continuing the rise of women's basketball.

Q. Having won a couple of these tournaments before, also in seasons where you were dealing with adversity, did this one feel different for you guys compared to the first one that you won the last couple of years?

NIKA MÜHL: I mean, every time we win, it's a different story. Every tournament championship is with different people, whether it's on the staff, on the team. It's just a whole different story, whole different vibe.

For me personally, this might be the most special one, not just because it's my last, but it's also because we have been dealt the worst cards ever, and we just never stopped believing in ourselves.

Coach said when the tournament started, or I think when Aaliyah was out or something, he said, I'm so confident. Nothing can shake us up.

That's true. It wasn't fake. And that's how we all felt, and we just fed off each other, and that's because we trust each other. We have been put in that situation so many times over and over again.

I don't think there's anybody better prepared for situations like this than us. Having six, seven available players today, seven on the bench, that's ridiculous. To be able to pull it off the way we pulled it off with the help of everybody in the gym, it was so loud, it was so electric. We were just feeding off of that, feeding off of each other, and yeah, this is probably the most special one.

Q. Nika, when the first committee rankings came out,

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you were 12th, not necessarily guaranteed a homesite. Now you're pretty certain you will be. How does it feel to know you're going to get at least one more game at home before you end your career?

NIKA MÜHL: Honestly, I don't think any of us -- me personally at least, I don't even follow that, so I had no idea. But I kind of expected the whole time that we were going to get that home game. So knowing that we are, it's just another opportunity for me and this team to play in the best gym ever in front of the best fans ever. I can't wait.

I feel like we're so excited. I feel like right now we're so tired but we could go out there and play another game. Just super, super excited and so happy that I'm going to be able to share the court with my team, especially on that court. It's the most special one.

Q. Nika, I don't think we've talked to you since you announced your decision to leave here. Can you take us through the process of that decision, and have you felt that sense of urgency even more now, now that it's over?

NIKA MÜHL: I feel like it's been such an emotional year for me, what this program has done for me. They took me and my team to Croatia to play in front of my people, brought my sister over to play in Gampel, and then just the senior night. I mean, the whole year was too emotional for me, so many things going on.

And I'm forever grateful and thankful that I was able to share those moments with the whole team. And I'm so thankful to Coach and the whole coaching staff and the whole program, everybody, to be able to make that happen for me. And I just felt like with all of that, it was the best year of my life. I just felt like I have given my all to this program.

It's just a feeling, when it's time for you to leave.

Q. Prior to this press conference we learned that Georgetown is in talks to hire Darnell as the head coach. Curious about the reactions to that news and how you've seen him as an X's and O's coach but also a leader in that program.

GENO AURIEMMA: There's a lot that goes into having a great season. A lot of people have to have a lot of confidence in each other. They have to believe in each other. Sometimes the adversity that they went through in the beginning bring people together.

But I think the way he navigated all this, he didn't make it a cause. He didn't make it -- he kept it real about our team

needs to be able to do this.

Getting to this game, I told him before the game, I said, when a team does everything that they're supposed to do or can do and put themselves in this situation, I hope that teams like that get rewarded because they deserve it.

And he deserves to be the full-time coach there. He's done something that hasn't been done there in a long, long time, and I hope it works out. I would wholeheartedly endorse him for that job.

Q. These two guys are the biggest bad asses on the team and they're sitting up there crying. Is that just a result of how much passion and energy and emotion that you guys have spent the last couple days to win these games without Aaliyah? What's it like to watch them pour their whole souls into everything?

GENO AURIEMMA: They approach every day like that since they've been here at UConn. That's how they've conducted themselves. They infect other people with their enthusiasm, their confidence, their love of the game. They're not afraid to put themselves out there and let everybody see, this is who I am. They're comfortable in their own skin, and everything about them is real. So the emotions are real, the feelings are real.

When you're faced with the end is near, that does start to well up because you invest so much of yourself into this.

The most passionate people and the most invested that people are are usually the ones that react like that.

Q. You've seen so much from the Big East from the original league to the American rebrand coming back to the original league. How have you seen the Big East grow and how can you continue to push it forward, especially in these four years after you rejoined the league?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, yeah, I've seen it all in this league. I've seen it from the inside, and I've seen it from afar. The league that I joined in 1985, in May of '85, was a step up from a league that really wasn't set up to compete at the same level that the men were competing around the country. So it took a lot of really good coaches and a lot of work and a lot of effort to improve on. And then we became the best basketball league ever in women's basketball when we added some of the schools from other conferences.

Being a part of that was the most amazing thing ever. I think every single night you were playing a top-20 team. Then unfortunately we weren't a part of it anymore. Even

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though we kept winning those seven years, it wasn't the same. Nothing is the same as winning in the Big East.

We're at a level now where I think these are the most trying times ever for this conference because of what's going on nationally and how other schools are able to throw their resources around. So we've got a lot of challenges coming up.

But, again, I think if you have the right people and you have the right coaches and they have the right administrators and we keep pushing forward -- last year we had five teams in the NCAA Tournament, and that was the most that they've had in quite a while. And I don't think we'll get five this year, but I think there will be tremendous changes and tremendous improvement in the next couple years.

Q. Would you have had the opportunity to coach some legends, Maya, Stewie, Bird, Taurasi. How does Paige rank up there in your opinion on that list?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, if I named all the legends that played for me at every position, Paige probably wouldn't make that team. I tell her that all the time. You can't go left. You can't beat anybody off the dribble. I just try to keep throwing jabs at her. You haven't won a National Championship. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I try to say as many things as I can to her because she just loves proving people wrong, as I said yesterday.

I go by this criteria. How many players have I coached that impact the team in as many ways as Paige does, and how many teams rely so much -- how many of my teams -- on one player to do so much for them? And I would say that that list probably starts with Diana Taurasi and Paige Bueckers. And no disrespect to any of those others, but they played on uber talented teams with lots of WNBA superstars and Olympic legends.

So whether she's a legend or a national champion yet, very, very few have impacted UConn basketball the way Paige has.

Q. Sticking with Paige, this is as complete a three-game stretch as we've seen her play all year. Did you feel like something clicked for her this weekend? Did something help her get back to herself here?

GENO AURIEMMA: Sometimes Paige has a tendency to -- God bless her that she thinks like this because I think it's great. She has a tendency to think that she is playing on an Olympic team and that everybody she throws the ball to should be just as good as her, so what's the difference whether I shoot it or they shoot it.

But I think maybe when Aaliyah went down that might have -- she already I think was coming into this tournament with a different mindset. But I think when Aaliyah went out of the game, there was a flip, and she realized how much more she had to do now. It carried over, I would say, the last two and a half games.

I think she never does enough. She passes up so much stuff. Maybe in the NCAA Tournament she won't have the ability to pass those things up. Who knows.

But yeah, this is Paige at her best, in totality. She almost single-handedly took us to the Final Four and the National Championship game, and it was only two years ago. How quickly people forget, right?

Q. How do you hope these past three games for Ice propel her for when Aaliyah does come back in a couple weeks?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, we have a better player than we had on Thursday today, I would like to think. And a lot of that is on Ice. As Nika said, Ice is her own worst critic, her own worst enemy. And these three days hopefully gave Ice the confidence that I can play at this level, I can compete with anyone that I have to compete with, and I can contribute to us winning.

And I hope that this feels so good and that she's so proud of herself that she'll want to keep experiencing this as we go forward.

Yeah, when Aaliyah does come back, we have more good players on our team than before Aaliyah got hurt, for sure. The same goes for our other freshmen, including Q.

Q. Geno, Ice felt like the Texas game was the low point for her, and I think probably you may have been the most unhappy with her at that point. Can you take us through that and kind of the trajectory from there to now and how you tried to build her and how she tried to build herself?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, it wasn't necessarily her fault. Going down to the Texas game, I thought, we have to try to match their size, so I'm going to go with Aaliyah and Ice and Aubrey, I think it went. It was a horrible decision by me. I put those guys in impossible situations, specifically Ice.

But I always want to see whether Ice is going to compete. She doesn't have to do everything right. She doesn't have to be perfect. But I want to see what her competitive spirit is out there. Like Nika's is or like Paige or KK or Ash. I

want to see how your competitive spirit can impact our team.

The skill level, that'll take care of itself down the road. I just thought she didn't compete. She was non-competitive, and that really bothered me.

I realized that I needed to be much harder on her. I needed to demand more from her. There were trying times leading up to this weekend over the last two months. There were times in practice where she reverted back to her old self, and she paid the price for it. But those didn't last very long like they used to, and she put the work in. She put the work in before practice, after practice, and it's paid off.

Like I tell these kids, there's a reason why we recruited you. So I hope I'm not wrong. I always believed that she had it in her.

But at some point, you have to believe in yourself, and I think that's evident that that's a lot more than it used to be.

Q. Paige was just saying that she's reflected quite a bit over the past couple of days. Lining up what she's capable of now versus what she was capable of as a freshman. And she said that's the one thing that might surprise her a little bit, this evolution, the changes through her body, the improvement in her game. What do you see the difference between Paige then and Paige the last couple years?

GENO AURIEMMA: This is an ongoing thing with her. I think her biggest change other than actually, yeah, her body type is different, the work that she's put in is different. She didn't even know what she didn't know back then about anything, really. She just went out and played, and whatever happens happens.

I want to win, but I really don't know how to prepare to win, Coach. I just want to win. Then you find out you're not going to win because you're not prepared to win.

She's had to fight some things that make her careless, make her lackadaisical with the ball or complaining all the time when things don't go her way, or why don't you get more and-ones. Well, because they don't call fouls when people foul me because they know I'm going to finish. Like it was rationalizing everything.

I think she got to the point where this is the burden of a star that you have to carry. And you have to be more prepared and more ready to take all the hits that are going to come your way and not complain and not whine about it and not find ways to rationalize it and just deal with it.

The kid is so prideful, she wants to be all that and wants people to believe in her, and she wants to please everybody.

Kids that want to please everybody end up pleasing nobody. She needed to please herself first. I deserve it. I own this now.

I think that's made the biggest difference in the world. She still needs nine dribbles to go by somebody, though.

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