

# Big East Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 9, 2025

Uncasville, Connecticut, USA

Mohegan Sun Arena

**UConn Huskies**

**Coach Geno Auriemma**

**Azzi Fudd**

**Paige Bueckers**

**Sarah Strong**

Postgame Media Conference



hand up to contest, and trying to make things more difficult, more pressure, more denying. Just making them more uncomfortable than we did in the first half.

**Q. Sarah, is there a different feel to the tournament than there is to the regular season, and did it take you any time at all, like yesterday or today, to get used to the atmosphere here, and how did you kind of settle in in this game?**

**SARAH STRONG:** I try not to overthink it. I just look at it as any other game and keep my same mentality for other games too.

**Q. Paige, I know the emphasis for you this year has been to take more open shots. How are you with that adjustment, and are you where you would like to be in that regard?**

**PAIGE BUECKERS:** Yeah, I feel like there's always room for improvement in any and all aspects of my game, but continue to hunt them more, find them more, and move without the ball more to get more wide-open shots. I think I've gotten better, but there's still progress to be made.

**Q. Paige, that second quarter stretch that you had where you scored a bunch, just what was running through your head? What was it about that part of the game to take over for you?**

**PAIGE BUECKERS:** Yeah, it felt more like a back-and-forth game. We weren't getting defensive stops, and I feel like I was just trying to take what the defense was giving me, be aggressive, get to my spot. My teammates were setting great screens for me, getting me open, helping me get to my spot.

So just trying to read the game and what it needed. And once you make a few, the basket seems a little bit wider, so just trying to stay aggressive.

**Q. Azzi, ultimately you guys went up to win comfortably because of your response. Do you think it was a valuable experience to have to come up with a response given that there's a championship game**

UConn 82, Villanova 54

**THE MODERATOR:** Joining us from UConn, Head Coach Geno Auriemma, student-athletes Azzi Fudd, Paige Bueckers, and Sarah Strong. We'll open up with a statement from Coach.

**GENO AURIEMMA:** You're playing in these games, you know, and you try to build some momentum going forward. We played really well offensively that first half, and our defense, I thought, struggled a little bit.

I think it's a reminder, too, how when you play somebody for a third time, it's never going to be as easy as maybe it looked the first two times.

Third quarter I thought we looked more like ourselves. I thought our defense was really, really good. I think we kind of separated ourselves from them.

It was a good way to finish the game in the second half. Hopefully we bring that momentum tomorrow.

**THE MODERATOR:** Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Paige, Coach just addressed your defense. Were there any adjustments defensively, just more intensity? I know Villanova made some tough shots, but they also scored a few easy baskets. What do you think was the difference defensively in the second half for your team?**

**PAIGE BUECKERS:** Just keeping guys in front of us, limiting paint touches, limiting wide-open threes, a getting



... when all is said, we're done.®

**tomorrow and then a national tournament? Was this a valuable experience to get pushed a little bit in the first half?**

AZZI FUDD: Definitely. And I think it was also that wake-up call that we needed. We can't have any other halves, any quarters, any little stretches with our defense being like that. So we need to continue to take pride in our defense for a full 40 minutes. Kind of like Coach said, not settle.

Even though it was our third time playing them, we can't expect them to be the same team we played a month ago.

**Q. Sarah, I asked Paige about you yesterday, and she talked about just your basketball IQ and how smart you are. Where does that come from? I know both your parents played basketball, but where does that come from just from your perspective?**

SARAH STRONG: I would say I really don't know where it comes from. I watch a lot of basketball, whether it was with my family or with my coaches. I mean, I just kind of grew up around it and just play. I don't know.

**Q. Sarah, this is a season high in rebounds for you today. Just what were you seeing that was making it so easy for you to get to the glass, especially on the offensive end?**

SARAH STRONG: I was just crashing the boards. I wasn't really thinking about it. I was told to be aggressive on the offensive end and just crashed.

**Q. Paige, in comparison to past years, where do you feel like this team is at this point in terms of having a lot of players available, in terms of maybe not being as tired or as beat up as you guys have been in the past because you only had six or seven players? Where do you feel you guys are stamina-wise this time of year compared to the past?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think a lot of the same, honestly. Maybe more physically less tired, less fatigued. But I think Coach does a really good job in practice making sure we're in great condition, whether we're playing 20 minutes a night or 40 minutes a night. I think the conditioning really comes in practice.

But obviously getting game reps, playing heavy minutes. Everybody -- we have, like you said, a lot more depth and a lot of people who are able to play, so that definitely helps keep guys fresh, keep the pressure up. It helps us with our press and making sure everybody is fresh and ready to go.

**Q. Sarah, can you just talk about the impact Ice Brady has on the game and how when she's in the post sharing the post with you, she impacts the game?**

SARAH STRONG: Yeah, she's very experienced -- or somewhat experienced. I mean, she has a great IQ and she's just an overall good player. Makes everything easier.

**Q. Azzi, when Paige was on a tear like she did in the second quarter, how much does that fuel you guys on either side of the ball?**

AZZI FUDD: I mean, it was a lot of fun to watch just being on the court. I was, like, okay, let Sarah and Paige do their thing, their screen and roll. Well, they're doing their thing on offense, I need to take pride in my defense and help them and help us string together some stops. I tried to pull my part on defense when they were doing their thing on offense.

**Q. Azzi, as a shooter, obviously you want the ball to go in. When you shoot, what are you thinking about when they go in? You shot 2 of 5 from the three-point line. What are you thinking when you are releasing the ball?**

AZZI FUDD: Well, sometimes I'm kind of surprised of how open I am. I think my teammates do a really good job of setting me good screens and getting me great looks.

I think just the usual. Make sure my feet are set, I'm holding my follow-through. My follow-through is going up, not out. I feel like those kind of roll through my head really fast.

Then I usually know right away whether it's going in or out. Then it's, like, what did I do wrong? What can I adjust for the next shot? Or if it went in, like, finally.

I don't really linger on shots. I'm like, okay, in and out. Next one is going in and then back on defense.

**Q. Paige, you guys saying anything at the half about the defense? They were hitting some shots that were hard to make, but did you guys say, hey, we have to turn it up a little bit and get more locked in defensively to shut them down the second half?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, we talked amongst players. And Coach talked about our defense and how we've really taken pride on that and how that was nothing like what we wanted to display and nothing like we've been in the past.

So definitely it was a huge emphasis to tighten it up in the second half.

**Q. Paige, tomorrow will be the last Big East game. Can you just sort of reflect on it? What advice do you have for, say, freshmen like Sarah who will be playing in their first conference tournament final as you look ahead to tomorrow?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, it felt like it's been forever, but it also feels like it was just yesterday I was a freshman. So, I mean, just to enjoy it, just to embrace it. It goes by super, super fast, and you don't even expect it.

Yeah, like I said, just enjoy it. Just embrace it. Never take a game for granted in this conference, in this league. Every single game you get to wear this uniform, wear it with pride. Yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies. Questions for Coach.

**Q. Similar to what I asked Azzi, just the fact that they did push you in the first half and you had to respond, is that good to go through?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I think it always is. When games are played where you're able to function without any kind of pressure whatsoever, the game is easier. And it's not realistic, though, that it's going to be like that.

It was good to come out and have to play in the third quarter with a sense of, you know, teams like Villanova, the more you let them hang around and hang around and hang around, you know -- and this time of year you don't want to play like that.

It was, I thought, an opportunity. You don't get a lot of these. Sometimes you go through a couple of weeks, and you don't get a lot of opportunities. So it was really good. Hopefully, you know, it pays off tomorrow or next week, two weeks. Whatever it is.

**Q. Similar question about Ice. Can you just talk about what you have seen from her the past two games and what you need from her to move forward in the postseason?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it's hard to come back when you don't play for an extended period of time. You have to kind of work your way back little by little, and I thought that her response has been really, really good.

I thought there were some things today that were not great, but it allows us to play differently. We can get Sarah more rest. We can put her either with Jana, with Sarah, by herself out there when we play really small. And the fact

that she's a threat to make a three like she did today and like she did I think the last game, whenever it was.

So it's a different dynamic. Ice has a lot of ability, and hopefully she's able to channel that and be consistent with it.

**Q. 16 rebounds for Sarah today. When she's aggressive like that and rebounding like that, what does that do for your team? What is it about her game that lets her have nights like that?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, she's tremendously talented obviously and has a knack for where the ball is and where it's going. Not everybody has that.

We had four offensive rebounds in the first half, and she got all four of them. I think the fact that she impacts -- I think she had 14 yesterday and 16 today. That's a pretty good two-day stretch. She impacts the game in every single area, whether she's defending somebody and it's a steal, whether it's a blocked shot, a defensive rebound, an offensive rebound.

I always like to think that we don't want to play with both Sarah and Paige on the bench. That's not something that is good for us. That's how important I think she is.

I'm okay with Paige being out of the game as long as Sarah is in the game because I think she -- it's more like having two or three players out there instead of just one.

**Q. It sounds like the players took some ownership at halftime about their lack of defense in the first half. For the last month, it seems, since the South Carolina game, you have been playing really well at that end of the court. You had 10 minutes yesterday without St. John's scoring and 16 minutes today without Nova hitting a basket. What is it about you guys and defensive teams come March? You're usually where you want to be it seems.**

GENO AURIEMMA: That has to be the foundation for everything at this time of the year. As you saw last night, there's no guarantees that open threes are going to go in. You like to think that, yeah, we're one of the best three-point shooting teams in the country. They're always going to go in. They're not.

So you've got to play a different level defensively in March than you do during the regular year, and that's not the easiest thing in the world to do. I'm glad they took some ownership of it. That's what they're supposed to do. I think you're supposed to be prideful in your defense. You want to be somebody that can be counted on on the defensive

end.

I just think that sometimes we get a little bit over-confident and get a little bit too comfortable. This is not the time of the year for that. This is the time of the year when you are actually trying to get people to score single digits in the quarter. That's the goal.

**Q. Geno, what was your approach or your tack in the second quarter and at halftime? Were you angry with what you were seeing, or were you more methodical in correcting things? What was your tone to the team that the point?**

GENO AURIEMMA: During the second quarter or in the locker room at halftime? Oh.

I think there was one incident in the second quarter where it was a little bit heated in the huddle because I felt like it wasn't just one incident or one time or one player, that it was kind of like everybody. I don't know that we had the focus that we needed to have.

No matter how much you convince players -- you know, Villanova is scrappy, they know they're always undersized. They know that they're playing teams that maybe have more talent than them. And they play hard and they're tough kids. They didn't believe me, and that's why I think Villanova did such a good job on the offensive boards.

So, yeah, it was pretty animated and pretty angry during that second quarter.

Halftime, not so much. I've learned with this particular team, and maybe just in general anymore, if you are like that too often, they kind of tune you out. They don't want to hear it anymore. You made your point. Let's move on.

So it was more, you know, this is what we need to do, this is how we're going to do it, and let's go. That seems to work with these guys.

**Q. When you are going through a little lull for the last couple of years, you've wanted Paige to be more selfish in that second quarter. Were you standing there going, yes, that's what I want. Do you have to say that to her, or...**

GENO AURIEMMA: No, she knows by now. We've evolved in our relationship. I think she takes everything I say as a suggestion. You know, I have to cross my fingers and hope that it lands in the right place.

When the game got close, when they took the lead, I think that, more than anything I could say, was the turning point

for her. Because at that point then she just started playing and started kind of taking it upon herself, which is good and bad.

Don't get me wrong, I think it's great because she's the one that can have that kind of impact, and I didn't have to say it. I didn't have to do anything. I think she just instinctively has to know these things.

I say, you don't pass the ball enough. Like other guys didn't even get to touch the ball in the second quarter. That's not how you want to play basketball. So, you know, I confuse her more than I help her (laughing).

**Q. Kind of on the same note, do you feel like it's more comfortable for her now to take the open shot instead of passing it up?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I mean, I don't understand it. There was one time in the huddle where I asked her why she needed three or four dribbles to get a shot that she had after one dribble and a lot of times after two. I think there's little things that help her.

She always gets the other team's best defender. It's always really, really hard for her to get a lot of daylight. When she does, it's a second and a half, and you don't want to waste it dribbling the ball when you have an opportunity to shoot it.

Today I think was the first time in quite some time where she actually just took the ball and wanted to play one-on-one with whoever was guarding her, which I think that's what we've been striving for.

Yes, there is a time and there's still times where, you know, I think the -- she has a lot of confidence in her teammates, which is really good. So a combination of the two going into the tournament is probably what serves us best.

**Q. How valuable is the consistency that you have gotten from Azzi over these last few games, both offensively and defensively especially?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, with Azzi it's kind of weird because everybody knows of her as a shooter, as a scorer, and I know she wants to be more than that. The interesting thing about Azzi is she puts a lot of pressure on herself, you know. Like you said, when she's shooting the ball, she's got all these things going probably through her head, analyzing every shot, every aspect of the shot and puts a lot of pressure on herself.

I tend to not put any pressure on her. A conversation recently, you know, I told her that. And she said I'm not a





baby. I can take it. You know, you can coach me harder.

So usually it's things that she's already good at that I want to remind her that if you're not doing those things, then you're not being Azzi Fudd. You know?

A lot of these kids -- it's interesting because they don't want to hurt the team, so they think if I don't take this open shot, if I'm not shooting well, I'm not going to shoot it. And that's what hurts the team. They're so self-conscious about I want to do the right thing. You have to remind them, the right thing is you have to do this on the offensive end.

Then when that happens, you remind her that she has an incredible ability to play defense, but in a different way than, let's say, KK or Sarah and those guys. You saw today how many steals she came up, how many times she got the ball.

Players that are really good shooters, like Azzi, they go through slumps too. You can still impact the game a lot of different ways. That's a lot. That's a lot.

**Q. Geno, 30 wins on the season. I think that's 28 out of 32 seasons. I know you like to talk about when 20 wins was a good season. Has 30 become the new 20?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, that used to be the standard for coaches, how many 20-win seasons you have. I don't know. If we won 20 games in a season, there probably would be a lot of people sitting here in front of me, but it wouldn't be for that reason, for the same reason that you're here tonight.

So 20 has become -- yeah, like anything else, I think at UConn the numbers that I get reminded of are so -- really they're hard to comprehend because they don't make any sense. Standards are out of whack. And yet, you keep getting there, so it makes it normal.

Yeah, now 30 is normal, which is ridiculous to even say it. You know, how many teams have won 30 games, 28 out of 32 times? How many? I don't even know.

**Q. (Off microphone.)**

GENO AURIEMMA: You know what, we did have 29. Yeah, we did have 29 one time. It was the bubble, right?

Yeah. The season was canceled. Yeah, the season was canceled, which is really good because that team kind of sucked. And if we went to the NCAA Tournament, we would have got our asses kicked. Not that I wished anybody ill will when the season was canceled, but I was pretty happy (laughing).

**Q. (Off microphone.)**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, yeah, there's no way that team was going to the Final Four. No chance. No chance. But somehow, you know, we managed to get that.

The consistency is probably what -- you know, Paige talks about it a lot. I think that's the thing that makes us the most proud of ourselves that we've been able to do it and not a lot of people have.

**Q. Jana El Alfy had 7 points, 7 rebounds, played about 21 minutes. How would you assess her performance tonight?**

GENO AURIEMMA: She's making progress, you know, by putting together longer stretches. There's still a lot left that she's, I think, capable of doing, but we're getting more consistent each game, each day in practice.

Things are starting to make sense to her. Hard in these games because there's nobody for her to guard sometimes. But at the same time, if there's nobody for her to guard because they play with five guards, it seems like, then there's nobody extra to be able to guard her either.

So we're trying to let her understand that what hurts her on one end should be a big huge asset on the other end. Little by little she's getting it.

**Q. You mentioned yesterday's game was a little gritty. Villanova, obviously, different type of contender today. Do you feel this game was smoother, other things to work on maybe for tomorrow?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, there's always things. There's two teams playing right now that their styles are polar opposites, right? So you don't know what kind of team you're playing tomorrow. One team presents one set of challenges. The other team -- like today and yesterday.

Yesterday the challenge that St. John's posed, completely different than today. Points were easier to come by today than they were yesterday because the offense just flowed, and it was great. You know, Paige...

But yesterday we guarded the hell out of St. John's. Today we didn't guard Villanova in the first half. So every game that you play, you come out of it feeling like we played the game that was meant to be played that day. And today's game meant to be played this way.

How it will be tomorrow? I don't know. Depends on who we play. But when it's all said and done, to be honest with



you, it doesn't matter who we play as much as what are we controlling that we can control? Tomorrow will be a lot harder than it was today, for sure, and it's supposed to be, right?

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