

Big East Conference Women's Basketball Tournament

Monday, March 9, 2026

Uncasville, Connecticut, USA

Mohegan Sun Arena

UConn Huskies

Geno Auriemma

Sarah Strong

Azzi Fudd

KK Arnold

Postgame Media Conference



but make it look so easy, and those of us sitting here are going, they just make it look so easy, it must be easy, can you put it into context for us what goes into making it look that easy?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, it's definitely not easy. It's coming every single day to practice not knowing what the coaches going to throw at us, not knowing what the practice players are going to throw at us. So I think all that work behind the scenes preparing for anything that Villanova, Georgetown, Creighton was going to throw at us, I think just that preparation that we put into it, what the coaches put us through to prepare us for every single scenario we might see. And I feel like we're so focused on each game that now we can take a moment, take a day, to appreciate this win and appreciate all those unseen moments, the hard work that we put in to make this possible, to make it look easy when it's not.

Q. Azzi, can you talk us through your emotions when the confetti was falling tonight. It's your fifth time here. Sometimes you haven't been able to play. Sometimes you've been you were young, obviously at the beginning. Today it's going to be the last time. Just what went through your mind?

AZZI FUDD: Just how grateful I am to be part of this program, fortunate to have had that confetti fall on me five times here, whether I was playing, not playing. But to be able to be a part of an incredible team all five years, and then also seeing people go through it for the first time, like, seeing everyone -- it means a lot it me, but to see everyone who this is their first time, like, seeing the joy on all the freshmen, on Kayleigh, on Serah Williams' face, it was a great moment.

Q. Sarah, last time you faced Villanova they got the better of you guys in the first half. That was two weeks ago at their place. But what did you take from that game into this game knowing you would face them for a third time?

SARAH STRONG: Yeah, we can't let get them get going. They kind of did whatever they wanted offensively,

UConn - 90, Villanova - 51

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions.

GENO AURIEMMA: Go ahead, start with them.

Q. Azzi or Sarah, what impressed you the most about the way that KK played throughout the three games of this tournament?

SARAH STRONG: I would say her confidence through both the games. KK's been doing really well in practice, and I'm happy to see that she's able to carry that through the tournament and just realize that no one can really stop her.

AZZI FUDD: I would say that -- Coach mentioned it earlier, but how she set the tone for us each game. She came out with the intensity and she was -- I mean, whoa, that shows her leadership because she started each game, we followed and her energy and intensity on offense, on defense, really just got all of us going, so thank you KK.

KK ARNOLD: Thank you, guys.

Q. Sarah, why don't you want to sit next to Geno?

SARAH STRONG: Oh, it's not about him. I just wanted to sit where my name was put by you guys. So I just wanted to do that.

Q. And super serious question now. Azzi, for you to put it into context for us, when you guys work so hard

... when all is said, we're done.®



defensively, so just try to play our defense, speed them up, and get them out of their rhythm.

Q. KK, to hear Coach talk about you after the game and you setting the tone, how important is it to you to go out there and make an impact and how do you feel that you are making a bigger impact this year?

KK ARNOLD: Yeah, it's very important to me, honestly, to set the tone for my teammates as well, I'm playing for them. And just to go out there to play with that same energy knowing that they feed off of it means a lot. Just this year, each and every game I've learned from myself, I've learned from my teammates, and learned how to get better each and every day, each and every second in practice, and translating it into the game, so...

Q. Azzi, it's the first time, I believe, in eight years that UConn has gotten to this point of the season undefeated, and you know the culture and history of the place so well. Obviously, there's still much more to come, but what does having done that mean to you?

AZZI FUDD: I think it's a great accomplishment, what we've been able to achieve so far this year. We have a couple days off, so we want to enjoy that, celebrate that, but like you said, our work isn't done yet. So as much as we can enjoy this win, enjoy being undefeated this season, being undefeated being a Big East champion, won't really matter in a couple weeks.

Q. KK, everyone's talked about the way that you started these games of the Big East tournament, but were you doing anything differently coming into these games to start faster or just anything differently coming in that made a difference for you?

KK ARNOLD: I would say just locking in of what I need to do for my team and how to get them going and how I can get myself going, which is on the defensive end, so making sure I have that intensity level, make sure I get myself right for that start of the game. And, honestly, I took some naps, so that helps as well to get a good little pre-game nap. So I'm so glad I got those.

Q. Sarah and KK, can you both speak to this? What's the most important piece of advice that Azzi has given you about games like this, moments like this, through the years?

KK ARNOLD: Soak it all in. I feel like be present, making sure that we're all present. We only have this opportunity once in a lifetime, especially, like, with different groups each and every year, and I feel like she's been a part of so many different teams and she's been present at each one,

and that's what she speaks from as well, just kind of the group that we have, make sure we're bonding, staying happy, doing those things.

SARAH STRONG: Yeah, she pretty much said it. Focusing on the next play as well. Like, in the game, there's a lot of ups and downs and Azzi is always, You got it, Sarah. You got it, KK. (Laughing.) Yeah.

KK ARNOLD: She's a great girl.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Seeing no more questions, congratulations. Thank you. We'll take questions for Coach.

Q. You talked on stage about teams maybe -- or people out there not knowing how hard it is to play teams like Villanova, and you've run through the Big East for -- year after year, but obviously you know how good the teams in this conference are that you play. What is it about this league that actually does prepare you for NCAA tournament games in March?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think the big thing is that you learn to play against styles that involve a lot of player movement. A lot of player movement. A majority of the teams in our league, that's how they play. Villanova didn't have a really good shooting night tonight. It's not that they didn't get good shots, because they did. They did. They just didn't shoot the ball well, as well as they're capable of shooting it.

But the thing about teams in our league is they work really hard to get open shots and they get 'em. And I think we're a pretty good defensive team, and they get pretty good shots against us. So when we get into the NCAA tournament, there are teams in the tournament that play like that and we feel like we're prepared to deal with that.

The thing that helps us a lot in the NCAA tournament is when we play teams that don't move as much as, let's say, a Villanova team, a Creighton team, a Seton Hall team, whatever the case may be, St. John's, when we play teams that don't move a lot, it really -- for us, our defense actually gets even better in the tournament than it is during the regular season. So I feel like it's been like that for as long as I can remember.

Now, the thing about our league right now is we don't have a lot of experienced, like, senior-laden teams, you know? A couple years ago we had Creighton. They were one win away from the Final Four with a bunch of really, really good players who played together for a while. So I think when you play in our league, you may not have talent to beat everybody, but -- I don't know what Villanova's going to be seeded in the tournament, but if you're not used to playing

against a team like that, you're going to have your hands full. I believe that with all my heart.

Q. You seem to have this lightness and kind of fun around this team, even just, like, how you flicked that water in Sarah's fairways just then. What's made this group so enjoyable to coach even as they go on this undefeated run and as you try to hold them to such a high standard?

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't know, one of those two things -- one of these two things -- or two things can be true. One, as you get older, you get a little more patient and appreciative of your life and enjoy it more, or you get older and you get a little more cranky, you know. So I've had just enough crankiness this year, but because of the way they are, they kind of make it hard for you to stay cranky and stay agitated with them because they enjoy what they do, they enjoy each other's company, they have a blast when they're around each other. They don't take things and blow 'em out of proportion. They're okay with, you know, we're going to have fun when it's time to have fun and we're going to work hard when it's time to work hard, and if I say something you don't like, that's tough. And they don't carry it with them. They just roll with it and let's go to the next thing.

So they're a kind of a team that is really bonded together on a common goal. They just want to spend time together and they want to play hard for each other and, you know, what more can you ask? No matter how much I complain, I mean, if -- you know, if you were to look at this team individually, you would say -- yeah, I mean, I don't know how many of these kids, you know, are even First Team All Big East players during their couple years here, but when you put 'em all together, they just have an incredible chemistry together and that makes it all work.

Q. You talked coming into the tournament about somebody always kind of has a breakout this weekend. Was KK that for you over the course of these three games?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I would say so. I mean, it has been the case in all the tournaments that I've been in in my career that somebody who is really, really good comes into this tournament and just has a weekend for the ages. Heck, even Ice had one a couple years ago when Aaliyah broke her nose. And I remember Meghan Pattyson playing with Kerry Bascom and was the MVP of the tournament. I remember Asia Jones was -- and we had Sue, and -- was the MVP of the tournament as a freshman.

So somebody always pops up and has a great weekend, and for KK to have the kind of impact that she's had these

three games and throughout most of the season. Now, we've kind of come to expect that from her, but I think that the confidence that she has on the offensive end is probably greater than at any time during her college career. And she's playing that way. She always had the defensive confidence, but I think right now she's in a place that she's never been, that she's really wanted to be at, and I'm really thrilled for her.

Q. There's always pressure on you guys because of what you've built over the years. Last year's team, there was pressure in the NCAA trying to get Paige a title, and you guys ended the drought, so to speak, of not winning one. Does that make this year a little easier that despite being undefeated, there isn't that sort of externalness of, hey, we have to get one for somebody. It's, okay, we're in the spot and --

GENO AURIEMMA: I tried to make it about me, but they wouldn't buy it. So we can't go there. (Smiling). The closest that we have come this year in a conversation that I had with a couple of them, was, you know, we have a lot of motivation to win, obviously. We're UConn. And there's pressure on us to win, obviously. And we have been to so many Final Fours, so the expectation is UConn's going to the Final Four. And so there's pressure everywhere you turn. But you do keep it -- you do keep it in the sense of what is the real motivation, is there one this year. And maybe last year that was the thing. Maybe it was the Paige thing. I think Paige is still in the picture today because I think they would be really, really pissed if we didn't win this thing at the threat of her saying, I knew you couldn't do it without me (laughing), you know?

And that probably motivates them more than anything you can imagine. Their respect for her is so great that I think they probably went into this season with that spectre of, well, they just lost, arguably, the best player in the country last year, and there's no way that they can repeat. And I think there's a real drive in them to prove it that we're worthy. It's not going to be easy, certainly. It's never as easy as sometimes it's looked, and it's going to be really hard. Harder maybe this year than certainly last year, for sure.

But I think we're prepared for whatever happens. If we play well, we have a chance to win. If we don't play well, we have a chance to lose. And that's kind of been the case for 40-some years. We just want a chance, you know. We just want to put ourselves in position to have a chance, that's it.

Q. You were talking about Villanova a moment ago, and I was thinking that you were talking about some of the other teams in the Big East too. What is it to be the

second best team in the Big East this year, in your opinion? From what it looks like, they're going to be the only other Big East team that gets in.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah. You know, it's a difficult topic. It's one that's, obviously, thrown around all the time. And I think if you look back before the NIL really took hold, we had four teams in out of 11. It could have been five. Last year Seton Hall and Villanova probably had one loss each that cost them a bid in the tournament. The margin is so slim right now to get in since the climate changed. And when you look at the top teams in the country, top 25 or top 30, very, very, very few non-conferences that, you know, rule the world. It's becoming very, very difficult if you're not part of that, you know, to get into the tournament, and it's going to get harder every single year, harder to keep your players, because people are constantly coming after them offering crazy things, and harder for teams in our league to get games against those teams where they can have a chance to prove how good they are.

So Villanova's had to win a lot of games, and losing to us when you see some of the scores in the conference tournaments that -- you know, they're a really, really good team. And I don't know there's anybody I respect more in our conference than Denise and Joe and the entire Villanova program. And it's a shame that, you know, they're not given the benefit of the doubt like some other places are.

I just hope we play one of those 7- -- and I hope Villanova plays one of those 7-10 teams that might get in the tournament. I would pay to go watch that game.

Q. With Paige gone, obviously, Azzi was going to have to play a different role on the team this year on the court, also behind the scenes. Looking back from 34 games in, how has she done?

GENO AURIEMMA: She's not that much different off the court. I mean, you know, she's pretty much -- you know, the way you see her on the court is the way she is. I mean, she's just like that. I think she's been able to -- class schedules and all that being what they are, and when you've been here X number of years, I think there's -- there's so much pulling at a lot of these kids. That's the one thing that's weird about the whole NIL thing. You get a day off, and normally they would all sit in their sweats in front of a TV and watch a basketball game or watch a movie. Now five of 'em are going out doing -- we got to do a photo shoot or we got to do this crap and that crap.

So you don't get a chance to -- if you don't work at it, and I think they work at it really hard, at spending time together,

and, you know, she doesn't say much. She doesn't. She never has. But her being around and what she does say matters. And the impact maybe has been more on the court, and for the first time this year and any other years, there's a assertiveness of almost I'm at that age now, and there's no one around that I need to defer to. And I think that's been the biggest impact that she's had on these kids.

Q. Wondering if you've noticed a difference in how Sarah Strong is approaching the second post-season. Obviously, last year still very dominant, but maybe she was holding back slightly because of the leadership you had with Paige, and now she's in a bigger role this year, obviously winning MOP today.

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, leadership's a weird thing, and a lot of people talk about it, and rightly so, I, guess. But not every team that's really, really good necessarily has quote/unquote outstanding leadership in the traditional sense, okay? Great leaders can lead a lot of different ways. KK is really, really vocal, but nobody would say, Hey, Azzi and Sarah, they take a backseat to KK. KK's their leader. No, she's not. And everybody says, Well, Azzi, she's been here five years and she's an All-American. She's their leader. No, she's not. Sarah Strong. Oh, man, she's probably the first-round draft pick. If she would have left last year, she would have been maybe the first pick. Who the hell knows? She's their leader. No, she's not.

They don't look at it that way. They don't even think of it that way with them, and anytime I try to make one of them, like, step up and be that in practice, they will look at me like why? Like, we got a bunch of guys that can do that. So none of them really wants to be that here, you know. And it took Paige a long time to be that.

So I don't know whether that's just the cycle that we're in where we're getting a bunch of really nice kids who don't want to do anything other than just hang out and have everybody be equals. That's the way I read it right now. They think like, Wow, we're all equal. Like, I don't think so. Like, I don't think you're all getting paid the same amount. I know that (laughing). So, you know, that's just the way they do it. It's weird. It's really, really, really weird. So the thing I see about that, again, just like I said with Azzi, the thing I see about Sarah is just, on the court, there's more of a definitive (banging table), This is what I'm going to do. There's no, should I or shouldn't I. But even yesterday, it was such a pain in the ass watching that little exchange between the two of them, Blanca and Sarah on the fast break, pass, pass, pass. I thought they were just going to keep passing right into the band. I thought that they would just get to the band and hand it to the trombone player or something. Somebody's got to shoot it, dude. And it's just

like -- I don't know. I don't know, it's a weird dynamic, but it works. It works. That's all I can say.

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Q. Did you know coming into this season that KK was ready to be, you know, that starting elite point guard for a really great team, and what do you appreciate the most about how she lifted her game up this year amongst a bunch of really talented players?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well I mean, in all honesty, there's no way of knowing whether or not that was going to happen. You always hope that it happens, but there's no way of knowing. That's why we said, Hey, if we can find somebody in the portal to take some of the pressure off, then we need to do that. And that's where Heckel came in. Because when someone's never had that role, it's hard to just throw 'em out there and say, Okay, this is it, it's sink or swim, man. It's do or die. Our team's going to live and die with you out there. That's a lot. So let's get somebody else in here just in case, just to take a little bit of the pressure off. And maybe knowing that, or maybe not even knowing it or maybe like going, Hey, why do you think we need a little insurance out here? I don't know, but I think she's grown more in the last four months than she had in the previous two years combined. But you don't know that going in. So all you're trying to do is, you know, it's not like it's Sue Bird's senior year and you can say, listen -- or it's Paige's senior year or you know even Kaitlyn Chen, who's been around and played a lot of basketball. So you have to let it kind of evolve, and you just kind of keep your fingers crossed and hope it does evolve. But KK wasn't doing this in November. She wasn't doing all this with this kind of confidence in December. People choose not to guard her, choose not to, you know, treat her like a real basketball player, on offense anyway. And I think these last three, certainly all of February and half of January, for the most part I think she's gotten to the confidence level where the questions that she's asking me now, she could never imagine asking me those questions last year or the year before. And that's why I'm really proud of her. And Tanya Cardoza, and Morgan, Tanya and Morgan have done a great job of, whether it's watching film or talking about what you see. So for KK to say, Hey, should we run this? Hey, how about -- or me just being able to leave some things up to her for her to decide, this is what we're going to do. Whereas before, even when she knew what she had to do, she would check with me first whether it was okay to do it. And there isn't that anymore. There's just, let's play. And, you know, that's real growth. And when people become better basketball players, that's one thing. But when they become more intelligent and more able to see the game and command the game, that's a whole different level. And she's not there yet, don't get me wrong. She's nowhere near where I want her to be. But I wouldn't trade her right now for anybody else.

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