

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: UConn vs Iowa

Friday, April 5, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Aaliyah Edwards

Paige Bueckers

Nika Muhl

Semifinals Postgame Media Conference

Iowa - 71, UConn - 69

GENO AURIEMMA: After we beat USC, one of the things that was said in the locker room was, you know, there's -- people always ask you how you feel about winning a game like this. And sometimes you just can't put into words how you feel. You just have to feel it. You have to be there and you have to have been there, be a part of it.

The same thing applies to when you lose at this part of the season. It's hard to explain how you feel when the season ends so suddenly.

But we put ourselves in a position to win a game that we probably had no business even being in, given the circumstances that we worked with. So when you say, well, you were lucky to be here, given everything, but in the moment, when you're trying to win the game and you don't win the game, you don't think you were lucky to be here, you just think about we had an opportunity to win this game and we didn't.

Iowa won the game and they get to go on and we get to go home.

Q. Aaliyah, were you given an explanation about the foul call? And what was your view of it?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: No, I wasn't given an explanation. There was no real time to get an explanation for it. My point of view, it was pretty clean.



Q. What did you make of the screen call from your vantage points on that play?

PAIGE BUECKERS: We just had a play. I thought we were going to run it. I thought we executed it well. We were going to get a shot off. The whistle blew. I didn't see it. It was in the rear of me. I was just trying to come off the screen.

Everybody can make a big deal of that one single play, but not one single play wins a basketball game or loses a basketball game. I feel there were a lot of mistakes that I made that could have prevented that play from even being that big or causing the game.

So, you can look at one play and say, oh, that killed us or that hurt us. But we should have done a better job, I should have done a better job of making sure we didn't leave the game up to chance like that and leave the game up to one bad call going our way and that deciding it.

Yeah, maybe that was a tough call for us, but I feel like I could have done a better job preventing that from even happening.

Q. Aaliyah, there's been a lot of talk about the officiating and criticism of officiating this whole season. How disappointing is it, though, that we're talking about it again after what was a really good effort by you guys especially given the circumstances you've been dealing with this season?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I mean, we can't really control what happens with the refs and their decision-making, but I just want to focus more on this team and actually making it all the way to this game when a lot of people didn't count us in.

So I'm going to leave this game with being proud of the team and proud of how we, game in, game out, just continued to believe in each other and lean on one another. And unfortunately we just didn't leave this game with a W, but we fought hard up until the very end.

Yeah, there were some decisions that, even myself, I wish

I could take back. But that's just how the game went. And we left it out there on the court today.

Q. Paige, can you talk about the effort that Nika played with today on the defensive end, and coming up with some big baskets when you needed them? I think seven assists as well. Just her overall game today.

PAIGE BUECKERS: I'm glad Nika got to show on this platform, on this stage, what she's been for us her entire four years at UConn, what she's been to us this entire year.

You saw the epitome of what Nika is, a tenacious defender, does everything this team needs her to do, controls the offense, plays with so much heart and energy, and plays with her whole soul.

You saw that tonight. You see that every time she steps out on the court. So, I mean, she does what Nika does. She played her heart out.

Q. Nika, on that same note, what made Caitlin so hard to guard?

NIKA MUHL: I feel like just her confidence, and obviously she's a great player, one of the greatest to play this sport. I feel like she makes everybody around herself better. So, yeah, just overall I would say her confidence and her ability to, you know, involve other players.

Q. Nika played 40 minutes I think the last three games, and none of you guys were coming out very often throughout this run. How did you physically maintain the intensity it requires to play that hard for that long this entire time?

PAIGE BUECKERS: There's a lot of people that help us recover. We have a masseuse that travels with our athletic training staff. Our doctors, they do a really good job of just making sure that we're resting, recovering, getting the treatments that we need.

And then just us being competitors, us being just grateful that we're here and trying not to take any of it for granted and not thinking about being tired or thinking about what aches, what hurts, how tired we are. And just being grateful that we're here and just trying to continue to play with that heart and play with the mentality of not being tired.

Q. Paige, when Aaliyah was being asked about the officials just a second ago, you were shaking your head. You look really frustrated. Are you mad that we're talking about it? Or are you mad that we're making a big deal about one call?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I'm just frustrated with the loss. I mean, we can talk about officiating, but players play, players decide the game.

Q. Paige, for you, because you'll be coming back, how long will it take you to find perspective about what you guys did this season under some really difficult circumstances?

PAIGE BUECKERS: The only thing you can really feel right now is the sting of the loss. There's going to be tears regardless at the end of the season just because it's my last time playing with these guys.

It takes a while to process after the season, win or loss, the whole journey of it all. But you just, for this year especially, from my perspective, you just appreciate it as it goes along, just being on this team.

Everybody saw the heart, the joy, the passion that we played with. We just love each other and we enjoy being around each other. And this season meant everything to us, against all odds. Nobody thought we would be here. All people posted about us was the worst ranking in 20 years, the worst start in 20 years, the worst seeding in the tournament in 20 years. And here we are at the Final Four.

It's not the ending that we wanted, but just to look back and -- it's hard right now, of course, because all you're thinking about is the loss, but this is relationships and memories we'll have for the rest of our life.

And I know we're proud of being here. Just the standard at UConn is national championships, so it's always disappointing. But I know we'll reflect after this and just get better from here.

Q. Paige, how does it feel to play injury-free? I know it was big for you this year. What's it like to be a UConn Lady Husky and play for Geno Auriemma, all three of you?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Just truly grateful to be part of this program, play alongside such talented players like the ones sitting beside me and also the ones back in the locker room.

It's tough that this is my last time I share the court with all of them and the last time I play under Coach. It's just no words how much the program and everyone who has supported the program has poured into me and what I've gotten out of it as well, but as well as how much I've grown not only as a player but as a person under Coach. And I'm just thankful for him and everybody who is a part of this

program and lent a hand in my growth as a player.

NIKA MUHL: I'm just so grateful to Coach for bringing me all the way from Croatia to here. Never in my life would I have thought that I would be here sharing this court with these amazing people, great players, great coaches, great staff and just enjoying every single moment of it.

I'm pissed right now. It really hurts, but I know that I'll look back onto this and I'll feel nothing but being thankful and grateful and blessed for what I've built here, what kind of experiences I've had here because this is family for life. And they love me when I was at my worst, when I was at my best, and it stays forever.

And I'm just very grateful to have had that luck and opportunity to, you know, come all the way where I came from to this place. It's special.

PAIGE BUECKERS: To your first point, I mean, now I've played a full season of college basketball injury-free, very blessed. I'm grateful for that.

But, yeah, to these guys' point, everybody comes to UConn to play for Coach. He challenges you. He believes in you. He trusts you, and he always has your back. And he's everything you could ask for in a coach.

And it's everything I dreamed of to play for him, to play for the whole coaching staff, to play in this program, to play along with people that are my sisters. So it's just been a dream come true.

I'm grateful that he recruited me here. He recruited everyone else around me here, because I love every single one of them. And I owe everything to this program, and I'm super grateful.

Q. Paige and Nika, how should UConn fans remember Aaliyah?

NIKA MUHL: I would definitely say not how should they but how they will remember her, and that's as one of the greats here, and as one of the players that had to overcome so much to get noticed, to get credit for what she does every day.

And I feel like this year she finally got the credit -- not even enough to how much she should have gotten, but I feel like, you know, she's been the most solid rock for us all these four years when we were dealing with so much. She's the most consistent one, the hardest worker. And she just puts her head down, doesn't talk. She just works.

As much as -- devastated as I am, that we couldn't leave

here with one thing that me and her and I mean all of us came here for and that's a national championship. I feel like, you know, we gave it our all and we really left it out there 100 percent.

I feel that's what people should remember her for, is a player that always leaves 100 percent out there no matter what, no matter who is watching, no matter if nobody talks about her, she leaves it all out there, and I can't wait for the things that are coming for her, because she's one of the greats, and she's going to be great.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I mean, to the national media she's under-appreciated, under-respected. She deserves -- the UConn fans, they know every single game, every single day what she brings and that's a competitive spirit, drive, determination, domination, and just the will to.

She never complains once what she doesn't receive, how much credit she gets. She puts her head down, like Nika says, and she just works and does anything this team asks and needs of her.

And she was put on a heavy load this entire year, this entire four years as the person who was the most consistent in the lineup, always carried the heaviest load, always handled the pressure, and just showed up every single day ready to go, regardless of the circumstances and who was around her.

I mean, UConn fans know how much Aaliyah means to this program. Like Nika said, she's one of the greats. And I'm so, so glad she gets to go up on that wall and she was recognized as a First-Team All-American because that's what she's been.

Aaliyah is everything to this program. She embodies this program. And she's going down as one of the greats.

Q. What did you make of the illegal screen call there at the end?

GENO AURIEMMA: I mean, there's probably an illegal screen call that you could make on every single possession. I just know there were three or four of them called on us and I don't think there were any called on them. So I guess we just gotta get better on not setting illegal screens.

Q. Coach Yo from Ole Miss right after the game tweeted that they call moving screen a lot on the screen/rescreen action. And she said, I think Geno screamed because he wished he could have that play back. And I wondered?

GENO AURIEMMA: Who said that?

Q. Coach Yo at Ole Miss -- and I was just wondering, or were you reacting because you didn't like the call or did you think that you should have run something different?

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't remember.

Q. To listen to what Paige and the others said about you a few minutes ago, and in particular knowing that Paige is coming back next year, what does it mean to you to be sitting next to them when they're saying what they said about you and this program?

GENO AURIEMMA: I mean, the object of what we do is to try to get people that we can impact and it's a great feeling when you feel like you have impacted people that are at an impactful age. I think every coach that coaches has players that feel about them the way these three feel about me.

I mean, that's what we do. That's what we do for a living. And you hope that you have players that appreciate it. And you hope you have players that understand what it is that we're trying to do.

And it doesn't always manifest itself in wins and losses, but you would hope that if players have played for you for four years, that they would feel the same way about you that you feel about them and how much they've impacted you as a coach and what when you've been able to take from them. And that's what makes this -- when it's done right, that's what makes this profession as great as it is.

Think about when you were their age and you had an impactful teacher that you felt like really helped you get from where you were to where you wanted to go and how much that meant to you at that age. So it means a lot to you for them to say that. I hope that they understand the impact they had on me.

Q. There's a lot of talk from your players, you've talked about the expectations with this program. Obviously it's not a national championship this year. It's six out of the last seven opportunities to make a Final Four. You make a Final Four at a time that this game has never been harder or had more parity in the game. I just wondered, two parts, one is do you find yourself able to find the level of satisfaction you'd like to out of, like you said, the impact you have on people and the success that you have; and do you think the expectations should be different at this moment?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, the expectations at UConn are

what they are because we created them. Somebody didn't walk into our building and say, okay, this is what's expected of you. We put that on ourselves now for the last 30 years.

What pisses me off is the minute we don't win a national championship for a couple of years, people think that our program now is less worthy of some others that have done it twice or have gone to the Final Four three out of the last four years.

So I think it's more rewarding on my end, not just to win a national championship -- obviously you want to win a national championship every year -- but people should talk about their own accomplishments instead of talking about what we're not accomplishing. That seems to be the big story.

I said this a long time ago. The only story is, like, when Tiger was at the height of his career, the only story on every Sunday was he didn't win. Nobody cared who did win. And now people always wanted it to be, like, well, can we celebrate other people? Okay. Celebrate them. Stop talking about us when we don't win a national championship.

But, again, that's the world we created. And we might not win a national championship, but we're right there when it's usually being decided -- and that's all that matters.

Q. When the ladies were talking, you were looking at the stat sheet. I saw you studying it very closely. You hold Caitlin to a poor night shooting. What jumped off the stat sheet at you as you think about this loss?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, if you would have given me this stat sheet without the final score before the game, I would have told you we won the game.

They're the highest scoring team in the country. And we feel like if we hold you to 71, we should win that game. And we should have won the game.

But Iowa thought they should have won the game. And they did win the game. So sometimes you go, well, both teams deserve to win the game.

I mean, we should have won the game. I'm not saying we deserved to win the game. But based on this stat sheet, when you look at it, you think, yeah, we should have won the game.

However not one play -- somebody said not one play decides the game. But when you look at it, for us, the way we've won this year in games like this, is Aaliyah, Paige,

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

especially those two, and then a third scorer, they all have big nights because that's what we need in games like this.

Tonight we didn't get that. Tonight we didn't get that.

And I've said this a lot, that I'll bet you in the 40 years I've been at Connecticut, I don't know how many NCAA Tournaments and all this stuff, our defense, I bet you I can count on my thumbs how many times they've let us down in the NCAA Tournament.

The NCAA Tournament will let you down is your offense. And if you don't make shots and if you don't convert on the opportunities you get, you're setting yourself up to lose.

Yeah, our defense was good enough to make sure we won the game tonight. But offensively we just didn't have enough impactful players play their normal game.

Q. A lot of times in the last couple of days you've qualified, in my 40 years coaching, this is the most amazing thing that we've done or the most -- overcoming the odds. You touched on it a little bit, but can you elaborate a little bit on the impact they've had on you?

GENO AURIEMMA: We were talking earlier today that there have been two instances at Connecticut that have been quite unexpected or quite remarkable, I don't know how you want to phrase it. But in 1991, when we went to our very first Final Four, there was absolutely no way to predict or explain how that happened. And yet it was the beginning of our program as it exists today.

Everything else since then it was expected that we would be here because of the situation that we were in, the kind of teams we had and the runs we went on.

And this year was the first one -- I even told the players during pregame introductions -- I said this is the first time that we've come here where it feels like we're the visitors, where it feels like we're actually the underdogs and no one expects us to win. And we did talk about getting here was the hardest part, and you appreciate that so much.

Today was probably the calmest that we've been in any NCAA Tournament game this year or any other year. There's a calmness about us, about what we have done and that what happened today was not going to change how we feel -- until the final buzzer, then it changed everything about how you feel.

Yeah, it was an amazing run. Loved every minute of it. Incredibly grateful and tremendously disappointed.

Down the road, it will sink in. But you know when you do this job for a living, the minute you stop, the minute you start thinking about, wow, that was amazing, that should make you feel really, really good. That lasts about 30 seconds, and then you start going over in your mind all the things that happened in the game that you wish you had done differently to win the game. That's the problem with this job.

Q. It might be hard to sort of ask you to put this in perspective after the loss, but there was a little girl who was holding up a poster that said, why I play basketball. And it had a photo of Caitlin and a photo of Paige. I'm just wondering, given your history in the game, you know, everything you've seen, what is it like to see what you got tonight? Sold-out arena. People were engaged in the game in a way we've not really seen before. It's going to be a huge TV audience. Can you put that into perspective what it's been like to see this?

GENO AURIEMMA: I said this up at UConn a few years ago. Everybody kind of pooh-poohed women's basketball 25 years ago, maybe, whenever it was. And it wasn't given the respect that it deserved back then.

So people didn't know who their idols were. People didn't know who they wanted to emulate because they never saw them -- until their dads got to be in the 30s and had little girls and actually started taking them to the games then all these little girls wanted to be like who? Whoever was on their team at the college where they went to the games. Now I want to be like, you name it, all those kids that played.

And now kids that have never seen these two kids play in person are the biggest fans and they idolize these kids. It's become a mainstream sport now because when little kids start wearing your jerseys and start wanting to grow up like you, that means you really touched a nerves.

It takes certain special players to do that. People think you win a lot of games, that's what happens. I don't think winning creates idols. I think the way people act. The way they behave. The way they treat people -- Caitlin and Paige, just two examples -- they have never ever, ever, I've never seen them walk away from an opportunity to say hi to a little kid or an adult or anybody for that matter.

And I hope it never gets that way, where you go to a professional sport and you can't get near anybody, you can't talk to anybody, you can't have any interaction with them. I don't know that there's that same connection that there used to be between little kids going to a baseball game and standing there and being able to talk to the

players.

So as long as we maintain that, there's going to be a whole nuther generation of kids coming you wanting to be like the kids that they see right now. As long as we continue to provide access for those kids to interact with each other. And that's what's happening now.

Q. I was hoping you could talk a little more just about what Nika and Aaliyah did tonight, what they've brought to you for so many years.

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, it's hard to wrap your thoughts in a neat little package and put a bow on it when there's so many emotions that you go through with these kids over a four-year period. So many highs, so many lows, so many in-betweens, so many accomplishments they've had. So many failures they've had, disappointments, amazing experiences.

It is kind of similar to the experience that you have with your kids between the ages of 17, 18 and 22, where, you know, those are the most impactful years, as I've said earlier, and you get to spend it with them.

And Nika has an effect on every single person that she meets. Her passion for life and just the way she embraces every challenge, every opportunity -- there is that coming-to-America, immigrant kind of mentality, of I'm so grateful for the opportunity; I'm going to go there and I'm going to show everybody that I deserve this opportunity. And I'm going to go home and everybody's going to be proud of me. There's a lot going on in there.

Aaliyah, much quieter, much different personality. There's more stoicism. And for her, it's just, I have some goals, I have some tremendously high aspirations. I come, I do my thing every day. I work hard at my game. I'm a tremendous teammate. I'm a great kid. And I represent myself, my team, my family in a way that everyone is absolutely positively proud of me.

So they both accomplished the same things. They just go about it in two completely different ways. And maybe that's why it works so well together with the two of them.

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