

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: UConn vs South Carolina

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Mortgage Matchup Center

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Sarah Strong

Azzi Fudd

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



and it is.

Yeah, I think we respect this team a lot. Really focus on our scout, focus on what we need to take care of. But I think we treat it the same as any other game.

Q. Azzi, the WNBA CBA kept the age the same for players entering the draft. When you think about your own development, if you think that age could move up to allow players to enter the draft earlier or if you think where it's at is a solid place?

AZZI FUDD: I mean, I think where it's at is a solid place. With NIL and the way college basketball is now, I don't really see the incentive to leave early as much as it was before in the past.

But, I mean, it's worked thus far. I think they're doing a great job.

Q. Sarah, last year you guys have four days between the Elite Eight in Spokane before you flew across country to Tampa. How important was it this year to have that extra day of rest in between this last round and this upcoming game?

SARAH STRONG: I mean, yeah, it definitely helped to get in early. We came ready to play. Doesn't matter how many days we get. Just try and be ready.

Q. Obviously you guys, undefeated this season, have played in a lot of lopsided games. That could change this weekend. How do you stay prepared mentally, physically for the clutch moments that might come? Can you simulate it in practice?

SARAH STRONG: Our coaches do a good job of putting us in those positions in practice. I think as a team, we're all locked in no matter if it's a blowout or close game. We're going to stay together through it all.

AZZI FUDD: Exactly what Sarah said. You can simulate as much you as you can in practice, which the coaches have done for us all year long. The habits that we've built all year long in practice and games will definitely help keep

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by UConn.

At this time we will take questions for our student-athletes.

Q. Question about the defensive adjustments you need to make. How much what last year's South Carolina team brought is relevant when there's so many changes? What are there from last year that you are able to implement defensively?

SARAH STRONG: I mean, yeah, they're a very big team. They definitely have us beat in size. Being able to dig out in the post, make the rotation on the skips. Does that make sense?

When they kick it out is pretty much what I'm trying to say.

AZZI FUDD: I mean, I think this is a new South Carolina team we're playing, a new UConn team playing that. That experience playing them last year, playing in the Final Four last year, is helpful.

Again, this is a new team that we're scouting and a new team that's playing against them.

Q. Azzi, is it different to play South Carolina in an NCAA tournament when you haven't played them in the regular season? Is it different to play them in a Final Four game instead of a national championship game?

AZZI FUDD: Uhm, no. I mean, we're still playing to win. We're still going to play our hardest, scout the same, treat the game like it's the biggest one we've played all year,

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us settled, keep us calm, keep us together this weekend.

Q. Azzi, a lot of younger girls look up to you. When they think of UConn women's basketball, that's their dream goal. What would you tell younger girls to work on when it comes to basketball or as a person overall to have more confidence in their game and as a person?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I would say put work in outside of team practices. But then play a lot of one on one. Just play the game. I feel like a lot of times people are so focused on workouts and specific moves and drills instead of just playing free, playing pickup, playing one on one, working on your game and your skills.

Being able to develop that, learning how to read what your defender is giving you, build your one-on-one game is really key.

Q. It seems like you enjoy playing with each other. How are you so close with each other and don't worry about stat lines, but worry about winning? What has it been like to play with this group?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, this is a super special group where, like you said, our number one priority, our main goal, is the team over individual stats, individual performances, which is a really special just mindset to have, especially in this day and age. I feel like it's rare to find a program like this.

Every single game, it makes everything so much more fun when you're playing for a bigger purpose than yourself.

SARAH STRONG: Pretty much what she said. I think we all enjoy being around each other and are genuinely happy for everyone's success, and we just want the team to do well.

Q. We made a poster. We're trying to see if you can guess who the two are.

SARAH STRONG: Like on the team now?

Q. Yeah.

SARAH STRONG: I'm going to say Azzi.

Q. There's two of them.

SARAH STRONG: I don't know who the other person is.

AZZI FUDD: I think it's Serah Williams.

Q. No.

AZZI FUDD: Whose hair is that? It's not my hair.

SARAH STRONG: Brown boho [phonetic]? I don't know.

Q. Azzi and KK.

AZZI FUDD: We look good.

SARAH STRONG: I thought it was boho, not her. I can see it now (smiling).

Q. When you got Blanca on campus, her versatility seemed sustained out. What immediately impressed you about the things she can do on the floor?

SARAH STRONG: Personally I see her confidence. I think from the first practice, she was doing what she did back in Italy or Ecuador playing pro. She didn't look like a freshman. Seems like she was before. She was playing her game.

AZZI FUDD: I would agree with that. Her confidence and aggressiveness. Also what stood out to me all season is how she takes care of herself, her body, how she goes about her pre- and post-practice activation stuff. I think it's really impressive.

Q. Getting the chance to play under a coach like Geno who has such a long history, so many achievements, what is that like for y'all? What are some things he's taught y'all that y'all hope to take into the next stages of your life?

SARAH STRONG: I would say to demand a lot out of yourself. He has very high expectations for all of his players. He demands a lot.

GENO AURIEMMA: Speak into the microphone so everybody can hear all these things you're saying about me (smiling).

SARAH STRONG: Just be very demanding of yourself and expect a lot out of yourself.

They can hear me. I can hear myself (smiling).

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, it's definitely a privilege to be able to play for him. I feel like every single day it's something new that he's teaching us, some new bars, wisdom. Like, I don't know. He's taught me so much. I'm going to take a lot with me (smiling).

Q. You both have experience coming into a Final Four. Do you still ever get nervous or feel any jitters, or is it

just business as usual?

SARAH STRONG: I definitely do get nervous. I think it comes from excitement. But I don't know, just back it up with like I know how confident my team, everyone is on the team, how hard we worked all year, all season, to be here individually and as a team.

As soon as the ball tips off, it goes away immediately.

AZZI FUDD: I agree with her. There's definitely nerves, excitement nerves. As soon as the ball is up, those nerves are kind of gone. It's just ready to play.

Q. Azzi, we are in Diana Taurasi's city at the end of the day. What would it mean to have success in her city? Have you spoken with her?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I mean, obviously would mean a lot to have success in her city. I mean, she is one of the greatest to ever play the game of basketball. To play here is amazing. I mean, we're staying on Diana Taurasi Way or something, which is really cool.

Being here is amazing. To have success here, it would be amazing. I think just being able to look up to her growing up, to watch her play, to learn from her, to see her pave the way and make all this possible now for us, yeah, it would be incredible.

Q. Azzi, you've had such a big journey throughout your career at UConn. It's coming to an end this weekend at some point. What do you think your legacy is at UConn? Sarah, what has it meant to play with Azzi?

SARAH STRONG: Playing with Azzi has been great. Just very different than last year. I think this year we've gotten a lot closer on and off the court. I've just learned a lot from her, from taking care of your body, nutrition. She eats all that healthy stuff.

I don't know, I'm really going to miss playing with her. No one's going to be able to come up, hand it off and shoot it like she will.

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I feel like I've been kind of in denial thinking about how this is my last weekend. I know, but I haven't really accepted that yet. I'm really just trying to enjoy every single moment. Like someone said earlier, maybe I said it, you said it, the last time being roommates, last trip, all that kind of stuff.

I'm trying not to think about that. I mean, I feel like this program has left such an impact on me, I can't even begin.

I don't know. I don't know. I have no idea (smiling).

Q. Azzi, at the Big East Media Day you said every stage of the season would be bittersweet for you. Does this moment feel bittersweet to you? What has this team meant to you?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, it definitely does. Everything has been bittersweet, the last of everything. But it has been so incredible, this year and this team. Every team I've been on has meant the world to me, but this team, being my last one I'm on, has meant everything.

Just how close we've been, how this year has gone, going through the ups and downs, everything with this team. I mean, these are my sisters forever. I know even when I leave, I'm going to be rooting for them, coming back, visiting them.

Even though this is my last weekend with them, last time playing with them, I know this isn't the end of our relationship.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much for your time today, ladies.

We'll begin with questions for Coach.

Q. The transfer portal, the teams that are in the Final Four all have additions this past year or two that have helped them through the transfer portal. Has that helped lengthen the gap between the haves and have-nots? Mid-majors had a terrible year in the tournament, and the four best teams are playing now, and they all have impactful transfers. Second part, you discussed the format of the two regionals. It's five years since the mess of COVID, being in the same spot, the light that was shined on inequity. Do you see the game, minus the regional issue, being better than it was five years ago for women's basketball compared to the men, the equity part of it?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, the portal and the revenue share, I think that was the death of the mid-majors, the death of high school players coming to play college basketball. It's never been harder for a high school kid to have the same opportunities that an existing college player already has. When your choice is go get a high school senior or go get a college sophomore for your team, a lot of coaches are deciding that getting a college sophomore is way better. The place where they usually go to get them is a mid-major.

So you're going to see less and less of those mid-majors competing in the NCAA tournament. There is a way that

they can fix that: just giving more opportunities to the mid-majors so that those kids that are playing at those schools feel like they have a path to at least play in the NCAA tournament, okay?

If you would eliminate all those teams that have a losing record in their league, say, Listen, if you have a losing record in your league, you don't deserve to play for a national championship. Give more opportunities to those mid-majors, just like the discussion of Miami of Ohio and Auburn. In what world are you discussing that, right?

That's a big problem. The amount of money that people are offering kids, so the revenue sharing is 20.5 and going up this year. The schools it's 22, 23, 24 just for the basketball teams. It's probably another 40 for the football teams. There goes that 22.5, right?

So yeah, salary caps, all that stuff would help.

As far as where the game is, it's crazy. I remember seeing that weight room thing. Everybody made such a big deal out of it. This is my 25th Final Four. Not once has any of my players said, Hey, Coach, can I go lift weights? It was the biggest embarrassment of all time that that caused the uproar that it did. Then the NCAA scrambling around going, We have to be equal to the men. There are things like the regionals that are important, right? There are things like the regionals that are important.

I think the game has grown so much since the pandemic. I think we have a moment here right now that we capture that moment and spread the game to more places in the country, we can really take advantage of it.

I think schools, more schools, I was thinking about this recently, they said it's the first time since the same schools are back to back. The last time we were in it, it was us, Tennessee, Stanford and Georgia. Think about that. Us, Tennessee, Stanford and Georgia. How many Final Fours have those other three schools made in the last 15 years?

The game has changed so much because so many more schools now have an opportunity to get here. That doesn't mean they're going to get here, but they have an opportunity to get here.

So the game's in a really, really good place. People are watching. Tremendous interest. It's our job now to put a really good product on the court.

Q. Sarah and Azzi talked about how confident Blanca is and how she came in with that confidence. Can you speak to her mindset, how that has impressed you for being so young and rubbed off on everybody else?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, well, I don't want everything that she does to rub off on anybody, to be honest with you. My head hurts every day at practice because there's nothing that Blanca thinks she can't do, so she tries to do every single thing that you can think of. You imagine how that goes, right, most days.

They were right, her level of confidence in herself, her belief in herself. And maybe that stems from you're 13 years old and living in Ecuador. How many kids from Ecuador aspire to play in the WNBA and then moves halfway across the world to Italy? She's not fazed by, okay, I'm at UConn, this is a really big deal.

Her belief in herself I think is one of the things that separates her. I think a lot of kids today, they don't necessarily have that belief. They don't necessarily have that level of confidence. They walk around like they do, but they really don't. Hers is real. I think it's infectious, you know?

Q. Comparing to last year, having the new pieces that South Carolina has, Ta'Niya not the only one, how defensively things changed for them as you prepare for them today? About Blanca, first year, but she's played more minutes in each successive NCAA game. What is your process to learn to trust freshmen who haven't been in this spot yet? How do you determine when and how you do it?

GENO AURIEMMA: Obviously this is a different South Carolina team than the one we played last year. Our two wins against them last year don't really mean anything going into tomorrow. The way that game was played has no bearing on tomorrow.

They have added some really key pieces. I think they're a much better team than they were last year. Really hard to prepare for. They've shot the ball exceptionally well this year. They've added the size that is hard to match up with.

Defensively we have our challenges with them.

The other part of your question about...

Q. (No microphone.)

GENO AURIEMMA: Trust my freshmen, right.

I don't. I don't. I just cross my fingers, close my eyes and put them out there. But we've had a history of freshmen playing really well in the NCAA tournament.

I was just talking to people out there about that when



Nykesha Sales was a freshman in 1995 and she was coming off the bench, and Jen Rizzotti was on the bench with three fouls in the first half.

I said, Kesha, you're going to have to bring the ball up.

And only Kesha could: I ain't no point guard, yo. I'm not playing that position.

Well, you're playing it today.

There are some freshmen you know whatever position you put them in, they have it. They have it. They have it mentally. They have it emotionally. You know the moment is not going to be too big for them. Then you just got to hope that they can do what you think they can do.

Q. When Azzi was talking about her kind of being in denial, I was curious, what was going through your head? If her talking about this being her last hurrah means anything to you, I guess?

GENO AURIEMMA: We may have discussed this at some point. I think the hardest part is being a senior at Connecticut and knowing what that means and what the expectation for you is, and carrying that around with you, this is my last time. So many of our players have ended their careers cutting down nets in the national championship game. You desperately want to be one of those people, you know?

If we win tomorrow and if we win Sunday, Azzi will be crowned one of the greatest of all time. If we don't win tomorrow and we don't even get a chance to play on Sunday, she's going to feel like this was a disappointing year for her.

I try to make it that it's November, don't think about January. Hey, it's January, don't think about March. Let's just enjoy what we've got right now. Once we won, once we beat Notre Dame to get here, to me Azzi's job was done. What happens here the next game, that's all just bonus. 'Cause getting here is the hard part, you know?

We'll talk about hopefully on Monday, that's when it hits them really hard, so...

Q. How special is it to play in the city where Diana Taurasi has built her legacy for the last 20 years and made a name for herself?

GENO AURIEMMA: I had dinner with D last night. In typical D fashion, she's the story (smiling). We practiced at 'her' facility yesterday, her logo on the court, right?

They said it, so I can. In my mind the greatest basketball player to ever play college basketball, and maybe the greatest WNBA player of all time. So to be here, I know that means a lot to her. I know it means a lot to our players.

So yeah, you don't often get a chance to do that, you know?

Q. Taking the incentives out of it, more from a developmental standpoint, do you think the W or the women's players are ready to leave college early from a developmental standpoint? Do you see that being the future of the women's game? What would it do to the women's game if that rule around entering the WNBA did change?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think it would be a really bad rule. I'm not saying they need to stay four years. I've coached players that after their freshman year, they would be able to handle it.

I do think women's basketball would suffer in that you wouldn't get the recognition around the country that Azzi Fudd has if you're in college one year, okay? If Sarah would have left after last year, you wouldn't have that continued watching her grow, and she would go to the WNBA. Great for her. Great opportunity for her. But a bad opportunity 'cause you're not going to replace her with somebody equal.

The game of women's basketball would be diminished I think if those kids were one-and-done. Maybe a baseball situation where you either go right out of high school, which very, very few, if any, of them would be ready to do that, or it's with three-year commitment, like baseball has.

I think the way football does it, you're not going to send a college freshman or college sophomore to play against grown men. That will break you in half.

I do think there's benefits for them to grow. Now with the money they're making, you got pros wanting to come back to college (laughter).

So I think the way it is now, if they was going to tweak it, I would like the baseball model.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, you are free to go. We want to thank you for your time.

GENO AURIEMMA: One more question.

Q. Kevin Durant said a couple nights ago when the Rockets honored the Comets, Cynthia Cooper, Sheryl

Swoopes, Tina Thompson, at halftime against the Knicks, that he feels bad for the Connecticut fan base, the Sun, but at least they have UConn basketball. How does that feel to hear that from Kevin that you built this brand from your first 1991 Final Four?

GENO AURIEMMA: That is a heck of a compliment from KD. It is unfortunate that we were talking about it. It's viewed upon as a mid-major, the Connecticut Sun are a mid-major. They're a mid-major compared to Chicago, Houston, L.A., New York. So it was just a matter of time maybe until that happened.

It's unfortunate because they had developed a tremendous fan base. It wasn't the UConn fan base all of a sudden became Connecticut Sun. They grew their own fan base.

But I think that's one of the advantages that we have up in Connecticut, that UConn basketball, men's and women's, are pro franchises. So we don't have a WNBA team, we don't have an NBA team, we don't have a Major League Baseball team, we don't have an NFL, we don't have an NHL team, but we have UConn basketball. Maybe that's why this is the sixth time that our men and women have been in a Final Four at the same time. 'Cause we are a pro franchise, you know? We've always been a pro franchise.

Maybe that gives us a little bit of an edge in how our players are treated. I think Kevin saw that firsthand. When I was coaching the Olympic team, a lot of my players were on the Olympic team, he was around them obviously a lot.

I mean, coming from him, I think that means an awful lot.

Thank you, everybody.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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