

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 Postgame Media Conference

South Carolina 62, UConn 48

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by UConn.

We'll turn it over to questions for our student-athletes.

Q. Sarah, can you walk us through what happened there at the end of the third quarter with the jersey ripping and the jersey change.

SARAH STRONG: It was an accident. I missed my shot. Ripped the (indiscernible).

Q. Azzi, can you talk about the challenge against their defense today. I think you guys started 1 from 11 behind the arc. Did you like the looks you were getting, or were they doing something that affected your shooting percentage today?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, they were super aggressive on defense. I thought some of our shots were a little rushed, some of our offense was a little rushed, out of pace.

But when we got a lot of good looks, a lot of shots in our offense, shots that we are used to taking. We just didn't hit very many or enough today.

Q. Azzi, can you sum up what Sarah has meant to the team this year. Everybody expects her to carry the team on her back. She's done so much for you guys.

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I mean, Sarah is the kind of player that makes everyone around her better. On the court, I mean, she does everything. I say it all the time, she does



everything the right way. She's the smartest, most (indiscernible) player I've ever played with. To be able to play with her, it's an honor, it's a privilege. To have someone who can create for herself, create for others, with the ball, without the ball, just knows the game, makes the right play at all times, can make everyone around her better. To see her confidence, to see her start to become vocal, I think the sky's the limit for her.

It's going to be an honor, a privilege to see her continue to grow into the player she can be. I mean, this is only the start for her. She's definitely a key to what this UConn team is.

Q. Azzi, you talked about you hadn't really wrapped your mind around this being your last game. Any immediate emotions after the buzzer?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah a lot of emotions (tearing up).

I mean, obviously this isn't how I wanted my career at UConn to end. These five years, I have so much to be grateful for. I couldn't have asked for better teammates, better coaches, a better experience. I'll look back on college. I know something we've talked about is how this game, like I said, not how we wanted it to end. But it doesn't define us, what this team is, what this season was.

So I think guilty, I feel like I let the team down today. But a lot of gratitude, a lot of love. Just a love that I'll never be able to verbalize and thank the coaching staff, the teammates, support staff, everyone from this program, that's supported me, touched me. I'll never be able to really verbalize how much they meant to me.

Q. Azzi, what's the biggest lesson you learned while playing at UConn? With the WNBA draft approaching, what players do you look forward to playing with or against?

AZZI FUDD: I mean, I've learned a lot of stuff here. But I think one thing with this team is just how important it is to play the right way, to play disciplined, to play smart, to play together. Be able to play with a team that really cares about you, cares for you. You can push each other,



motivate each other.

I feel like it changes the game of basketball completely. I think that.

Haven't really been thinking about what's next.

THE MODERATOR: We want to thank you for your time this afternoon.

We'll continue with questions for Coach Auriemma.

Q. What exactly happened at the end of the game in the last second with you and Dawn?

GENO AURIEMMA: I just said what I had to say. Nothing. Nothing.

Q. There are notable UConn alums in the house tonight. How cool is it to see the alum spread the love for the program?

GENO AURIEMMA: It's one of the great things about coaching at Connecticut. There's such a passion for the school, for the basketball program. They come back every year. They spend a tremendous amount of time with our players. They are our biggest supporters. They stay connected Huskies for life. And it's one big part of the thread that goes through who they are when they're at school and who they are when they leave. I'm really proud of that.

Q. Geno, it was 38-0 up to now. People were starting to talk about 40-0, which you had not done in a long time. I just wonder, I know there's a lot of heat in the moment, but how difficult is it for any UConn team, no matter, to go undefeated in a season?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I was never comfortable with that narrative, people talking like that going into the season, in the middle of the season.

Trying to do that in today's day and age, it's always been difficult. Don't get me wrong. I mean, we were an undefeated team one year. When we got to regionals, I think we played 12 of the teams that were in the Sweet 16.

It's really hard. It's always been hard. It's why I don't like the narrative November, December, January, February, I don't care when it is, because there's too many good teams left to play. There's too many big moments left to play in.

The four teams that are playing here today, I don't know that you would be surprised if any of them won. It wouldn't

be like if any of these four teams won, you'd be like shocked.

For us to be viewed as they're going to go undefeated, nobody can beat them. This game's about playing the game you're supposed to play. They played better than us offensively. We held them to 62 points. You hold a team to 62 points, you think you're going to win that game. We just didn't make the plays that we needed to make on the offensive end.

All the credit to them for how they played and how hard they played and the shots they made when they had to make 'em.

Q. Dawn said postgame that the exchange had something to do with her not shaking your hand pregame. Is that what you said to her postgame? Do you have any regrets about the way you handled that exchange with her and your communication about her to Holly Rowe in the fourth quarter?

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't have any regrets about what I said to Holly Rowe. Why would I? Why would I? I've been coaching a long time. I've never had a kid have to change their jersey because somebody ripped it and the official said, I didn't see it.

There are a lot of things that happened in that game. Unless you're on that sideline, you have no idea what's happening on this sideline.

No, I mean, for 41 years I've been coaching and, I don't know, 25 Final Fours. The protocol is before the game you meet at halfcourt. Anybody see that before? Two coaches meet at halfcourt and they shake hands, correct? Ever see it? They announce it on the loudspeaker.

I waited there for like three minutes. So it is what it is.

Q. You said you said what you had to say. What did you say specifically?

GENO AURIEMMA: Why would I say it? I said what I said. And obviously she didn't like it. I just told the truth.

Q. Can you expand on the frustrations of the physicality in the game that seemed to cause some of the tension that you had and the frustrations that you had.

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't have a problem with the physicality of the game. I don't. I think that the game is physical. I think we're just as physical in a lot of ways as any other team that we play against.

I don't know that we were as aggressive and as physical as we needed to be on the offensive end, you know? I thought on the defensive end we were.

You don't hold a team that's averaging 90 points in the tournament to 62 unless you are. So the physicality goes both ways. I don't have a problem with that.

I guess we just weren't aggressive enough on the offensive end to match.

Q. Back to the undefeated thing, do you wish you all had gone through a little bit more adversity this season heading into this game?

GENO AURIEMMA: You got to run the race you're racing. There's nothing you can do about it. It's not our fault we beat all those teams in November and December by 30. I can't tell them, Let's make the game close.

It is what it is, you know? We just weren't good enough tonight. It has nothing to do with going through adversity or no adversity. I've had teams come here undefeated and win the national championship that the game was over at halftime. About 38 out of the 40 games. I just think you have to play good that night.

What happens to you along the way, I don't think that maybe has any bearing on it. At least it hasn't in the past, so...

But who knows.

Q. You talked about the handshake. There's pictures of you guys in videos. Was your frustration that it took her a while to get over there? Was this a separate instance pregame versus the one on social media?

GENO AURIEMMA: No, I think you missed the point of what I'm talking about, so... I'd rather not go into it.

Anybody that's been in the NCAA tournament, you know what I'm talking about.

Q. Even beyond this game, UConn, South Carolina, you and Dawn, you've had spirited battles back and forth, one team getting the better of the other. What is it about this matchup specifically that has been elevated, and what is it about the counterattack that each of you coaches have to do?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think two good teams, always a lot of good players on the floor. A lot of games that you play that are really, really meaningful that have high stakes

when you play them. I think when that's the case, I think it's going to be a certain intensity level to those games.

If it keeps happening, then obviously you know going through the NCAA tournament at some point, you know, you're probably going to meet them somewhere along the line.

I mean, this is their sixth Final Four. This is our 17th out of 18 years. Pretty hard to avoid 'em.

Q. Despite the loss tonight, when you think about your team's journey from the beginning of the year to now, what is something you're most proud of?

GENO AURIEMMA: Whenever you're going through a season, a lot of things happen. Some show up on game day, some don't. You know all the things that your team is really, really good at, and you know all the things your team is potentially going to get hurt by. You try all year long to kind of cover up those things and hide 'em from everybody so they don't see 'em.

This team did a really, really good job of that. They really played for each other. We talked a lot this year about coaches can only coach so much, and how they coach each other means more than what the coaches are saying. I think they did a great job this year of coaching each other and getting the most out of each other.

So I was really grateful for that, to be able to coach a team like that.

Q. Sarah Strong is a young superstar, just a sophomore. We've talked about how she's cool, unfazed. How do you help her take a loss like this, build some fire and motivation for her next two years?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, sometimes we do forget she's a sophomore. She's carried a huge load for this team. An awful lot falls on her. Tonight she'll be the first to tell you that she is not proud of how her game went today. A lot of shots that you've seen her make for two years so easily today didn't go in. She still got her 12 rebounds, did all the things she normally does, and played 40 minutes.

I don't think Sarah Strong needs me to put any fire or motivation or anything into her. We'll be back here next year. She'll make sure of that.

Q. When you talk about the physicality, you get up, they punch back... In the second half, it seemed like they got you to rush a lot of your shots, shots were getting rushed at the end. What was the challenge in how they adjusted to what they were doing differently

from the first half?

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't think there was anything different in the second half that happened in the first half.

I think what happened at the beginning of the third quarter, I think there was maybe three or four straight times where we came out with empty possessions. They turned it over and that led to some easy buckets for them.

A lot of times I thought we had opportunities in our transition, and we didn't execute it. I think there were times when we were playing so fast that we couldn't take advantage of the opportunities that we did get.

They did a good job I think of making the game like that in the halfcourt. That's why I think we needed those opportunities in the full court in transition.

The game wasn't played the way we want to play it. It was played the way South Carolina wanted to play it. I think they did a great job of doing that.

Q. Some clarity on the end of the third quarter. Sarah seemed to say she made a mistake and ripped her jersey. You're under the impression --

GENO AURIEMMA: She didn't make a mistake. She said it was a mistake. She didn't say she ripped her own jersey.

Q. The video seems to show she did. You're under the impression that a South Carolina player ripped it?

GENO AURIEMMA: No, I'm just saying there was not a single foul called on them in the third quarter. I have a kid that's one of the best players in the country and has got the ball a lot and is trying to get something done, and you mean to tell me there was never a time when she got fouled? Find that hard to believe.

Q. There's nothing you can do to prepare your players for a moment like the loss today. Undefeated season. You can work on professionalism, composure. I was still struck by the absolute professionals in the locker room right now. Emotional moment. The reputation of your program is how your players carry themselves off the court. How much pride do you take in your players right now?

GENO AURIEMMA: One of the things we said in the locker room when we got in there was there's nothing that I can say to a team that's sitting there losing in the Final Four that's going to make them feel any better, that's going to make it hurt any less. Nothing. It's going to be there. They have to deal with it. We all have to deal with it.

I also said that here at Connecticut we have won so much that I think we know how to win. I think we know how to win with class and we know how to win with dignity. We win with humility. We know all that, because that's what we do. You made a point to say yourself how we handle ourselves.

But the true test is how you handle yourself in this moment, the way they were in the locker room, how they handled that moment. I want always for our team to be able to handle both moments the exact same way. No one's won as much as we have. So when you are part of that, you have to be gracious in your losing. I never want it to be anything other than that. And treat people with respect.

Q. As the winningest NCAA coach ever, being at your 25th Final Four, what keeps you motivated to continue coaching?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, after tonight I don't know that I want to continue coaching (laughter).

Somebody was reminding me earlier, I think this is our 25th Final Four in 36 years, since 1991. We've been to 25 Final Fours since 1991. 25 out of 36.

I was telling my players that up until last year, I had lost more times in the Final Four than I had won, that there's no stigma, there's no stain in losing 'cause you have to be in this. If you're going to be in this enough times, you're going to lose enough times, okay?

The motivation is to keep coming back here and trying to win it again. Once you get here, you have to understand that there's a high probability that you're going to lose. You can't be afraid of that. You can't put yourself in a position where, well, this is what a lot of people do. I maybe don't want to be in this position; that way I don't have to feel what my players are feeling right now.

If you're going to be in that situation last year, where Azzi and Ash and Sarah and KK celebrated winning a national championship, you also have to be able to accept the fact that you're going to lose a lot of times in these games. 99.9% of all the kids playing college basketball this year are going to go home without winning a national championship. Somebody out there Sunday night is going to win one. Everybody else, they're not losers.

So what's the motivation? Just keep going back and try to change the outcome of games like tonight as often as I can, and never feel like losing here is any kind of disaster or catastrophe, oh, my God, the world's coming to an end.

It's just another opportunity to go forward and work real hard to get back here and try to change the outcome.

At Connecticut, after we won in 2016, we went nine years without winning again. So there was this feeling out there that it's over for Connecticut. Meanwhile, we kept going to the Final Four. For nine years we kept going to the Final Four, but we kept losing.

If you walk away when you're losing, you're never going to get another opportunity to win again. So I think that is my motivation right now.

Q. Early in the second quarter Dawn got on the refs pretty heavily. Looked like you came over and yell/asked if she's allowed to talk to them like that. Did that feed into your frustration at the end of the game at all?

GENO AURIEMMA: I just want to make sure there's not a double standard. I'm of the opinion that if I ever talk to an official like that, I would get tossed. So I just want to make sure there's not a double standard, that some people are allowed to talk to officials like that and other people are not. That's it.

So yeah, I was pretty frustrated.

Q. On what you just said, do you think Dawn should have been tossed? My second question is, it seemed like in the beginning of the game when Raven was guarding Sarah that maybe that frustrated her a little bit. What do you think was effective about that game plan, why maybe she got off to a slow start?

GENO AURIEMMA: It's not my place to judge whether any coach should ever get tossed. I'm not suggesting that that should have happened tonight at all. Not at all.

I think as far as the game plan was concerned --

We do this a lot. I think the more pressure, the more defensive pressure you try to put on the other team's best player, you're hoping that there's a level of frustration a little bit, and it starts to affect the way they play.

Yeah, I mean, you saw the way Sarah's stat line looks, how it went for her. Yeah, and maybe if she was a senior, maybe she would have gone, Oh, yeah, I've been to a lot of Final Fours where this happens.

This is the first time that it's happened to her. Last year it wasn't quite like that because Paige was playing great, Azzi was playing great. It was the first time for her.

Certainly I think it had an effect. And we would do the same thing defensively if I was them.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time this evening, coach.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you.

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