

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Syracuse vs UConn

Monday, March 25, 2024

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

UConn Huskies

Geno Auriemma

Coach

Paige Bueckers

Aaliyah Edwards

Media Conference

UConn 72, Syracuse 64

MODERATOR: Okay. Quick reminder of our format tonight. We're going to have the opening statement from the head coach followed by questions for the student-athletes only and then we'll return to the head coach for questions after that. Coach, at this time thoughts on the game?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, thank you. Well, I told you yesterday or whenever it was I wasn't crazy about our bracket, you know, these two games here because I knew what we were up against, and really, I can't say enough great things about Syracuse and Felisha and the job that she's done and how hard and how competitive her kids play. But, having said that, we have some pretty tough-minded kids that when it was time to win the game, when a couple people tried to lose the game, we had a couple people on our team that knew how to win the game and that's what you need at this time of year. You need people who can make winning plays at big moments, especially the last five minutes of the game. You need people that can make those plays, the shots that they have to make, the rebounds that they have to get, the lose balls they got to get, the stops they have to have.

Aaliyah didn't have a particularly great game offensively, but down the stretch she got every rebound and defensively, I mean, she just, you know, guarded the rim. Everything that they got was on the perimeter, and we have the best player on the market and, you know, just saying that because the numbers in this world of analytics, the numbers say that she is and the whole stat sheet says



that she is and everybody that watched knows it.

We're fortunate, and we get to go back to where it ended for us last year. I think we're a different team, different mindset and we're hoping for a different outcome.

MODERATOR: Okay. At this time we'll take questions for the student athletes. Right here in the front, please.

Q. Dom Amore, Hartford Courant. Paige, can you talk us through the last few minutes particularly after Nika fouled out what was being said, what was the communication like? What were those last five minutes like?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, we actually had been in that position before against Notre Dame and we had the wrong approach versus tonight. We called a huddle and we were, like, all right, we got to band together, we really got to focus and lock in the same way we did when Aaliyah went out for the Big East Tournament. You just get hyper focused, hyper locked in and we just didn't want our season to end. I thought we responded much better, in a much better way.

Syracuse is a great team. They made tough shots, great shots, and they cut it close but I think we all just knew in the back of our mind like we got this. We just had a better mental approach to it than we did the last time and just continued to spill confidence within each other and just know that we needed to make winning plays, especially on the defensive end trying to limit their threes and only limit them to one shot. So just the last five minutes was just trying to hyper focus and hyper lock in for all of us.

Q. Jim Fuller, Associated Press. Paige, can you just talk about your two freshman, Ashlynn with the big deal and KK with that, a crazy three there.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, they make winning plays. They've been doing this the entire year, and, again, we just try to spill confidence in them. It's basically three seniors and all freshmen so they have no choice but to step up to the plate and perform and contribute to winning and not be fazed by the stakes or the environment or anything like



that, and they do it every time. So, I mean, extremely proud of them, they continue to perform and not play like freshmen. Yeah, very, very proud.

Q. Maggie, CT Insider. Paige, kind of on that same topic, just what was going through your mind when you saw KK make that big shot and is that the play you guys had drawn up for that?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, the play we drew up was highball screen. I think both came to me, the wing person came up to guard me and KK was wide open and it's just a testament to her hard work. She comes in before practice every single day, does a guard workout with Mo or Tonya, so I think that was her work in fruition, seeing that shot go down and all the hard work paying off and her just stepping up to the plate and being confident enough to take it and hit that big shot. It was really, really awesome to see.

MODERATOR: Third row on the right here.

Q. Alexa, ESPN. Paige, when you got that last rebound with five or six seconds left you went to the student section when it was a dead ball and you beckoned them to get loud, just what was that moment like for you when you kind of set in that you guys were going to win and you were able to harness the crowd's energy, too.

PAIGE BUECKERS: I was trying to recreate an image that I had from two years ago, but it's just so much fun playing here. I'm so thankful that Coach recruited me here and I get to play in front of this great crowd and I just remember last year after the Baylor game, it was a second round game. I just went to my car and I was so emotional because these high-stake games, these games that mean everything, I miss it so much and I just told myself before the Big East Tournament, before this tournament. Just to embrace it and have fun and I prayed so hard a year ago today to be in my shoes where I'm at right now, so just to appreciate it, especially playing here in front of the best fans in the country with the best teammates and the best coaching staff in the world.

So, yeah, I give all glory to God, all glory to my coaching staff and my teammates for instilling that confidence within me just to have fun and play my game. So, any time you can embrace the crowd is really fun.

MODERATOR: Third row on the left there.

Q. This is T. Baker with The Next. Aaliyah, this is your last game in Storrs as a Husky. Can you just talk through how you were feeling down the stretch as the game got closer knowing this was your last game on

your home court?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah, knowing the game was on the line, I didn't want my last game to be played in Gampel on an L, so I know we needed a dub and I think as a team we just knew that we weren't done yet. We know that we're a better team than a second round team, so my mindset going into it the last five minutes or so was just a game of possessions and to take it one possession at a time, not get too sped up and not slow the game down to slow. But I think that as a collective we just made winning plays and individually, we all made plays and as a collective, we just all played to win.

MODERATOR: 4th quarter row on the right.

Q. Taylor, 24/7 Sports. Paige, tonight's game had you matched up against another big-time scorer in Dyaisha Fair. What was it like playing against a player like that tonight?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, that's one heck of a player. Definitely the numbers speak for itself but one of the best scorers college basketball has ever seen. Very tough cover. I give Nika a lot of credit for chasing her around the whole entire game and making things tough for her. We know she's going to hit tough shots. The objective is just to try to limit them and make them as contested as can be without fouling, but she's -- the way she keeps the ball and the way she has it on a string, she can shoot the three. She can get to her mid-range. She can finish at the rim. A great three-level scorer and she's one of the toughest covers.

MODERATOR: Right there on the right.

Q. Justin with The Daily Orange. Paige, Sophie Burrows had a breakout performance tonight hitting six threes. What was it like sort of containing Syracuse's three-point barrage and what did you see from Burrows tonight?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, they hit a lot of threes. You're so focused on containing Fair that sometimes other people get open and they stepped up to the plate and made big shots for their team so you got to give credit to them. But, yeah, they shot the ball extremely well from three.

MODERATOR: All right, last one for the players. Right here in the front.

Q. Aaliyah, 2.7 seconds left and you're on the line, obviously that's the chance to ice, the put the game away right there. I know you exhaled. What went through your mind at that second, do you remember?



AALIYAH EDWARDS: That second I was just taking in the crowd and just the atmosphere because the last time I'll touch the court on Gampel Pavilion, so I was just taking in everything and I know that I was going to sink the two shots but it was more just kind of reflecting on how far I've come how far this program and how far the team has taken me, so it was more exhale of comfort than anything.

MODERATOR: Okay, great. Thank you. You guys can head back to the locker room. We're going to open it up now to questions for the head coach. Please raise your hand, we'll send the mic over. Nothing? Right there first.

GENO AURIEMMA: Not so lucky.

Q. Hey, coach. T. Baker with The Next. You saw some really incredible performances from your freshmen tonight, just clutch plays. Where does their performance tonight rate in sort of the history of UConn freshmen you've seen step up in these types of moments?

GENO AURIEMMA: It's been a while since we've been in that situation where they've had to do so much, play 40 minutes game after game. It's not easy for them. Normally your freshmen are there, they play, and then when things start going sideways you get them out, they get a breather, they get to regroup a little bit, but for them it's nonstop, and, man, I know I'm probably missing some but I remember Ann Strother and Barbara Turner back when they played with Diana and they started as freshmen. We ended up winning a national championship. And Bria Hartley and Stephanie Dolson. Every once in a while you get two freshmen that are forced into the starting lineup and you just keep your fingers crossed and hope that they have it in them. They're two really, really competitive kids. Ice, I think it's hard to go from playing 40 minutes two games in a row to now having to go in and out, in and out, so I've got to figure that one out a little bit.

But, yeah, let's just hope they can keep it going. I'm really proud of them. It means a lot to them and I'm happy for them.

MODERATOR: Down here in the front.

Q. Expand a little bit more, if it's possible, on Paige and what she did tonight, really taking over but particularly, no matter how crazy the game got, she never throws up a crazy shot or an ill-advised shot and you've exhorted her to do that once in a while but she just cannot take a bad shot.

GENO AURIEMMA: No. No. It's one of those things that I

think that the really conscientious players, the great players that have so much confidence in themselves understand the difference between what I want and what our team needs. This is the most shots this year probably that she's taken and rightly so. She's doing what we need her to do to win games and she doesn't just indiscriminately come down here and chuck stuff up to get points. She passes upshots that she would easily make.

When you look at -- the stats will tell you one thing, you know? The ten rebounds, six assists and the four steals. But it's like when they happen and how they impact the game that's so remarkable and I just think we'll go -- this team will go as far as she's able to carry that kind of a lead. As long as she keeps getting a little bit of contributions from everybody.

MODERATOR: Okay. Right in the middle here, and then we'll come over here.

Q. Coach, Ben, WJPZ. You said this year's team has a different mentality than last year's group. How did you see that mentality out on display tonight?

GENO AURIEMMA: This particular team -- it's weird what I'm going to say. We had a similar game last year in the Baylor game. Very similar. And I sensed that we were, like, coming to the, you know, the end. When we went up to regionals, we needed an easy game and we started off 10-0 and we relaxed because we didn't have it in us to play a game like tonight. I think we're a little bit different because we've played so many games like tonight where we've had to play like this that I think we have that build up, those reserves built up a little bit now. I just -- and we didn't have Paige. So, you know, the mentality of this team is way different. Yeah. Threw Paige into the mix.

MODERATOR: Third row here on the right.

Q. Alexa, ESPN. Paige has talked about how, I guess, going into the Big East Tournament she tried to really learn how to play with joy and play a little bit more free mentally, even though the pressure was on her to step up. Have you seen that, I guess, mental shift in her to in some ways let go a little bit more or play with more joy while also having more of a burden to produce?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, page is a fun-loving kid who does play basketball for the joy of it. Now, for the adulation that comes with it or I'm playing to be first-team all American. I'm playing to be whatever. She's playing for her teammates and she plays for the love of the game. I think she would love nothing better than to have a full team of contributors so she can just have fun playing and not have to carry all that, but, you know, that's the hand that

she's playing right now. As I said, I have so much respect for her and what she's doing, I can't say enough things about her. Really, I can't. There's just too many things that she does.

You know, we'll go through a shooting drill sometimes for five minutes and not one other person will make a shot except her. It really makes you shake your head and go when these guys start missing and start doubting themselves, what if she wasn't there to break the string? Just little things like that to make them feel better. And the fact that she passed it to KK. KK's thinking, man, the best player just passed it to me at crunch time. That's just a huge confidence-builder, you know? And plus, she was on a row. She made the last one. She made the first one of the game and the last one of the game. What a streak. She was hot. She was cooking.

MODERATOR: Fourth row here on the left.

Q. Chris Carlson, Syracuse Post Standard. Geno, given the setting and the handshake line, it seems like you stopped Dyaisha for a decent amount of time and gave her a hug. What message did you try to send her off with?

GENO AURIEMMA: I love hugging the guys that are leaving, just thanking them. Hey, thanks, you guys are great now get the hell out. I don't want to play against you anymore. I hope she's out. Oh, good.

You just have to have a lot of respect for kids like that. She was very emotional in that line. She's a competitor, fierce competitor and she wants to win. She came along with Felisha and they've transformed that program into a top-20 program and set the stage for what's coming next. I just admired how she plays and the confidence she plays with. She might have been on the team -- I don't know if she was or not. We played Buffalo in the NCAA Tournament one time. She might have been on that team. I don't know. Felisha always has somebody that kicks our butt.

MODERATOR: Last one here is Pat in the front.

Q. Geno, Nika picked up three fouls in 30 seconds to foul out of the game. What at that point, they were making their run. What did you tell the team at that point and can you just talk about their response to Nika being out of the game?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, you know you have a good team when everything that needed to be said was said by the players, not me. So if they just sat there staring at me, deadhead and waited for me to tell them everything

was going to be okay, I would have had a problem with that. So during the timeout I sat down and as I'm thinking about what I'm going to say, obviously they're telling each other this is what's going to happen. So they were coaching the team and that's when you know you have a really good team. When the players are coaching the team and they're saying the things that you would say. It's more impactful. They own it. It's theirs. I'm glad they did. It's not what I would have said completely, but I did tell Nika to go sit somewhere where I couldn't look at her. Concentrate on the players that are in front of me. I didn't want to get distracted. (Sighing)

MODERATOR: Okay. Thank you very much, Coach. Appreciate your time. Syracuse will be up momentarily.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you, everybody.

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