

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

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Target Center

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Semi-Final Media Conference



I think women's basketball players have traditionally had to work exceptionally hard to be accepted into the highest levels of sports, and I think social media has helped grow their profile, the players individually, and by association, I think the teams that they play for.

I think the exposure that they've gotten on social media has been, I think, incredibly significant. You see the ratings, you see the popularity of the game. Even though some of the crowds over the weekend weren't as good as you'd like them to be, I think the excitement surrounding the tournament is as great as it's ever been.

As far as uniformity and NIL, I think everyone rushed to hurry up and put this thing together, and I'm not sure that they understood all the ramifications of what they were doing and just how good coaches are at exploiting any loopholes that might exist or don't exist and using it to their benefit.

Originally it was intended that no, you cannot use this as a recruiting inducement. Just that statement itself is so ludicrous that whoever wrote that down on paper has probably never recruited anybody, has probably never been involved in recruiting, has never been recruited, and can't spell recruiting. Because anytime you open up the possibility that a player can get paid, regardless of where you think that money is coming from, all you have to do is just talk to other coaches around the country. And it's different rules for different coaches, different rules for different parts of the country, and they need to be sorted out.

Is school A going to figure out a way to give a kid \$500,000 to come to their school and pretend that it's NIL related and school B cannot do that? Then yeah, it's a huge recruiting disadvantage, and there are recruiting disadvantages built in already in recruiting kids. This just separates those who can from those who can't even more. I'm not sure that's what we're talking about to grow the game.

Q. I wanted to go back to the Kaplan report; one of their suggestions after everything last year was the idea of holding the men's and women's Final Fours in the same city over the same weekend. I'm curious

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, anytime you go to the Final Four, it's significant. It was the very first time we went, and it feels that way today.

What's unique about this one obviously is the journey we took to get there, how we had to navigate the season with everything that transpired. And I couldn't be happier for everyone associated with our program, and I couldn't be more proud of our players and our coaching staff and our support staff for managing this incredibly difficult situation all year long and giving us a chance to compete for a National Championship.

Q. Just wanted to ask, there seem to be more stars this year spread around the Final Four teams. I'm not sure if that's having to do with everybody's social media impact and all these corporations with NIL putting their money behind these kids and bringing their eyes to them. But how does that help grow the game, to have now kind of celebrity players in a way you didn't before?

And a couple weeks ago Neal Eskin went before the legislature to ask them to change the NIL law because he said they can't use UConn's logo in Connecticut and that puts you at a recruiting disadvantage compared to other schools. I just wanted to get your thoughts on whether there needs to be some revamping to make this more uniform across the country and how it's going to impact recruiting.

GENO AURIEMMA: Obviously the social media part has changed the landscape for a lot of people, not just women's basketball athletes. The average person out there makes a five-minute video, puts it on the right place at the right time and packages it the right way, and they become an instant star for the sake of being a star.

your thoughts on that and whether you think the Final Fours should be kept separate as they have been?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I have a few thoughts on it, but I'm willing to try anything. I'm somewhat of a risk taker. Generally these reports reflect a segment of the population, not the entire population. So every coach that I've talked to that's participated in the Final Four, and I've talked to quite a few after the report came out, not a one said we should have both Final Fours at the same place.

So it's easy for somebody that hasn't been there or someone who's involved in women's basketball but doesn't coach and doesn't play to say, yeah, this would be a great idea, let's do that. But if you've been there, if you've been a part of it and you know what the pitfalls are if you combine these two things, you would never say let's do that.

I know that there's people even in my own league that are staunch advocates of doing it, and I'm okay. I mean, you have a right to believe whatever you want to believe. But you can't say in that report women want to see what their value is on their own. Okay, we want our own TV rights, we want our own way to promote and market and do all that, which I think is fabulous. It's about time. And then say, you know what, we really need to be where the men are because that helps us.

So which is it? Are we good enough to stand on our own, or do we still need assistance from somebody else? I don't know that -- we're saying two different things.

Me personally, I've had a great experience. My players have had a great experience every Final Four that we've ever been to. But you know, we talk about the dumbest things. We've got the weight room situation squared away. Wow. My kids haven't touched a weight in 21 years. We've got the swag bag taken care of. That's terrific.

You know what we didn't take care of? Two teams played last night, Monday night, to go to the Final Four, and now we play Friday, and we fly out today. The guys finished Sunday, and they get Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and then they play Saturday. Why don't you address things that actually help kids get ready to play their best basketball at the most important time of the year? But we've got the weight room squared away, and I'm sure we got other things squared away, but we don't get squared away the things that are most important. I don't think having the Final Four at the same place is right now the most pressing issue that we have in this game.

Q. After considering things with Dorka overnight, what adjustments do you think you can and need to make to

deal with the size of your opponent coming up on Friday night?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, you know, we were just having that discussion this morning, and we said, it's kind of par for the course for this particular season. We lose a big kid that is playing in their first NCAA Tournament -- and Dorka was so excited that she couldn't see straight in the first couple games. She was finally getting her legs under her yesterday and played a phenomenal three and a half minutes. Huge impact on the game.

As fate would have it, the fracture in the wrist, and now she's out for the tournament. Devastating for her. But it could only happen to us three days before we play the longest, most athletic front line, the tallest group of players that exist in the tournament, that being Stanford's team and their amazing post players.

What adjustments can we make? All we can do is do what we do. We've got to play with what we have. We can obviously tinker with some lineup situations as the game goes on. But we have what we have, and that's not changing. We're going to have to figure out a way to win with it.

It's unfortunate, but that's kind of been our season this year.

Q. Obviously when you get to this time of year and you're facing some of the best teams, you end up running into players that you maybe would have wanted to see in Storrs. And in particular with Haley Jones, what can you say when you watch a player like Haley or like Aliyah and other players when you have to face them? Do you ever think, I wish she was doing this for us?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I've been doing this a long time, and our fans are like this. They get all pissy when you don't get everybody that you recruit. My response to them is if we got all of them, who will we play against?

It's idiotic to think that we're going to get every single kid that we try to recruit. You just mentioned Haley and Aliyah. You talk about two of the best players in America today. Haley proved it last year in the Final Four by being MVP, and Aliyah has proven it all year long, that she's the best center in college basketball.

You know what I think when I see them play? You know, we still have an eye for talent. We still know who we should recruit. That's how I feel. I'm happy for them.

When a kid says they're not coming to Connecticut, that's



one of the first things I say to them. I said, I'm sure we'll see you down the road, and you know what? You always do.

Q. During the game last night one of the TV people said that Bueckers is not 100 percent. She looked awfully good to me, and I'm wondering what you can tell me about what she's not maybe doing that she did before.

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I mean, some people at 90 percent look better than some people at 100 percent, so it's all relative, right? How can you expect someone to be at the top of their game when they haven't practiced and haven't played in two months and now have just been back a couple weeks?

To the outside viewer, it may look like, well, that's the same Paige that I remember. Well, to us who's here every single day, maybe she is some days, maybe she's not. But last night when she had to be, she was. That doesn't mean if we had a game tomorrow that she'd be able to go the way she used to be able to go. That doesn't mean that for one night she can't be Paige. And she was last night.

You know, Paige is a normal kid. She's no different than any other kid her age. She just happens to have tremendous talent. But it takes time when you've been away for a while. Paige thinks she's 100 percent. Paige thought she was 100 percent the day of the surgery. She thought, why can't I practice when I get home, so she's not doing what a normal kid does. So I was wrong, she's not a normal kid.

Q. All these Final Fours for you and your program, do you find yourself appreciating each one more or looking at them any differently after so many trips? I don't know how long you'll coach for. I'm guessing it won't be for a stretch that includes another 22 Final Fours. I'm wondering in a week like this, do you slow down and kind of appreciate this experience a little more compared to feelings you might have had in the first few in the '90s and 2000s.

GENO AURIEMMA: I do think so. I do think you reflect more. You appreciate more. Each year that you go on, you're reminded how difficult this really is.

Now, some years we make it look not so difficult. We had four good years with Stewie and Mo and Tuck and Phe and Lou and Gabby and Kia. We had Steph and Bria. We had a stretch where people thought it was pre-ordained. But you realize every year is a challenge, and all it takes for me was losing in the Final Four on a buzzer beater two years in a row to remind you that yeah, nothing is guaranteed.

Appreciate everything that you get. Appreciate everything that happens.

I wish it was as easy as some people think. They go, you know, Connecticut always plays real close to home. That's a byproduct of being the No. 1 seed in the country most years. You know that they have the best players. Well, actually we don't, we just already talked about a bunch of good players at all the other schools.

So what you have is you have us as a program that we try to do the same thing every other school does. We try to recruit the best kids that fit our program. We try to coach in the best way we can just like every other school does, and then we go out there and let it fly. Like I told the players, when I was young I used to have a job, and we used to say get them up or sleep in the park, man. What do you got to lose? So in these games we play with a what-do-you-got-to-lose mentality, so maybe that helps us.

Q. You're returning to the site where you guys won your first national title in 1995. How do you feel about in that regard coming back to Minneapolis and what are your memories of winning that first one back in '95?

GENO AURIEMMA: Every memory that I have about that game is burned into my mind. I can probably remember every single possession. I can remember every time-out, halftime what we did, where we stayed, everything, because everything was just so big. We were riding that undefeated season. We were getting unprecedented attention that had never been bestowed on a women's basketball program. So we were dealing with a lot, and the excitement was unbelievable.

We were playing a storied program with an all-time Hall of Fame coach in Pat Summitt. All the elements were right there. You remember that. You remember how crazy it is that you played Saturday and Sunday. If you asked people to do that today they would have a mutiny. But we played Saturday and then we played Sunday at noon. And what's even funnier, we played Stanford in that semifinal game, and that's who we play this year.

But the Target Center will always have a special place in our hearts here at Connecticut. I go to Minneapolis a lot. I haven't been to the Target Center except maybe once to see the Lynx play. I'm excited to be going back.

One thing that will be different, my son won't get lost after the game and maybe everybody have to go look for him. He's 32 now, 33, so I think I do not have to worry about that, let me concentrate on the game.

Q. That iconic, undefeated team, how much that helped raise the popularity of women's basketball after that team?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think that circumstances -- you know, all the stars were lined up exactly right. We had the right kind of team. We had the perfect opponent in Tennessee. We had a group of players that were really comfortable with the media. We had a huge media contingent that followed all of our games, which obviously helped.

I think when the New York Times started to cover our games on a weekly basis, I think that made us a worldwide team, national team, not just a local regional team.

We took fans from it, and I think people from around the country for the first time instead of just reading about it or instead of having to search for where do I find the women's game, it was right there in front of their faces. I think they got to see two great teams, two great programs compete for a National Championship, and the rest is history.

Again, I don't think anybody orchestrated any of that. It just happened. But it all happened at the same time and the way it was supposed to happen. And then you piggy-back the Olympics on top of that, and they happened to be in the U.S., and the WNBA the next year and the rest is history.

There was a lot of people that came before us. Don't get me wrong. There was a lot of people that came before us that had a lot to do with creating what women's basketball has become. But that particular year, that particular team had the good fortune of having all those other elements that I described all come together at one time.

Q. Speaking of some of those that came before, Tara, 30 years ago she was a national champion and now she's a reigning national champion again. I was just wondering if you could speak to your relationship with her. Is it a rivalry? And just the longevity of that relationship and of her career.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, you know, there's coaches that have been part of the story, the women's basketball story, and back when Tara was at Ohio State, I think people were aware of her as a coach and their success. Then when you put the Stanford logo and all the advantages that a school like that can provide and a terrific coach, you're going to have the kind of success that they've enjoyed.

I think there isn't anything that Tara hasn't done, right, between coaching the Olympics and winning National Championships in the early '90s, to winning in the 2000s, and going to 15 Final Fours in between. I wouldn't say we

have a very close relationship like I have with some other coaches, but we also have a relationship where I think we both understand exactly what we're trying to do. And we both, I think, have tremendous respect for each other and our programs.

I've always found Tara to be one of the people that consistently talks about how do we make the game better, how do we make the game better. I think she's been an incredible pioneer in that respect.

Q. You've been to Final Fours with Dawn pretty often by now, but to be in Cheryl Reeves' adopted town now, with Dawn, the three of you there together as flag bearer for women's basketball from the Philly area at a time where there's still not a WNBA team yet -- granted you lost to Villanova this year so I know what you're going to say, but there's not truly an elite D-I women's team out of the city right now. What does it mean for you to be in Minneapolis with Dawn and Cheryl right now?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, Philadelphia has a reputation -- which we all know, those of us that grew up in that area, and those of us that never lived in that area -- Philadelphia has a reputation. Most of it good. But one of the great reputations that Philadelphia has is it's a great basketball town, and it's a great high school basketball town, it's a great college basketball town. The Sixers for the longest time, at least when I was a kid and after that, played for NBA championships and had iconic players.

So Philadelphia has a history of basketball, and Philadelphia has a history of women's basketball where Immaculata pretty much single-handedly during that time, they were the original showtime Lakers on the women's side. You could say Pat Riley and Cathy Rush were cut from the same cloth, and all the Hall of Famers that they had on that team. And that happened to be when I was living there and going to school there.

It's no surprise to me, Dawn having grown up there and coached there at Temple and being the Olympic icon that she is and now coaching a team that's won the National Championship. And Cheryl right now is the most successful WNBA coach that's coaching, and she's our next Olympic coach. None of that surprises me. Having spent time around those people and having spent time in the Philadelphia area -- Philly is a hard town. The people there are hard. They take their sports hard, seriously. Sometimes they don't necessarily give credit where credit is due to everybody.

Philadelphia does two things great: They cheer their winners better than anybody, and they boo their losers

better than anybody. They're passionate, and when you have a passionate place, you're going to produce passionate players and coaches, and certainly Dawn and Cheryl are that.

Q. Haley Jones' name came up earlier. I was hoping you could elaborate a bit on what makes her such a unique player. Just watching Stanford's last two games, it seems like she controls the action so much from dribbling the ball up the court to her passing to her scoring to her rebounding. What challenges does she present and what do you see in how she's evolved and grown as a player in her time at Stanford?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, there's certain players, I think, that if you lose that player, you -- let's say you lose a point guard, let's say you lose a center, how do I compensate for that.

If you have Haley Jones on your team, you actually have three players, maybe three and a half, who knows. When you're able to put somebody like that on the floor, you shoot the ball better. You handle the ball better as a team. You pass the ball better as a team. You rebound the ball better as a team, all because of one person.

There are not very many Haley Joneses. I've been fortunate to coach a couple of them, and I know what it's like to have somebody out there that can do those things, and it makes your job easier as a coach and it makes your job as an opponent really, really, really difficult in how to prepare for that.

I enjoy watching her play. I enjoyed watching her play in high school and I enjoyed watching her play at Stanford, and I enjoyed getting to know her. She's a fantastic kid. I'm thrilled for her and happy for her and just amazed at what she does.

I'm sure there's a bad game somewhere in her future someday. I hope it's this Friday, but I'm not counting on it. (Chuckling.)

Q. Just to follow up on the question earlier about Paige, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about her recovery, how many minutes she's played in the last couple days and whether you're worried about them given where she is in her journey.

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, first off, Paige thinks she's different, so let's start with that, that the same programs and the same protocols that involve rehab and injuries don't apply to her. That she can recover faster, she can -- all delusional, don't get me wrong. I admire her optimism in how fast you can come back from injuries. But people

forget, she had a really bad ankle thing that she brought with her from high school that had to get taken care of last summer, so she didn't play much last summer, and then on top of that then you throw this in. So she's had to deal with a lot over the last two years.

All in all, she keeps a positive attitude. She thinks the best of everything. She never has a negative thought. She is constantly talking positively, acting positively, positive with her teammates, positive with everyone that she comes in contact with.

I do think that helps her recovery, and I do think that was one reason why her recovery was what it was this past wintertime. I wasn't sure whether she was ever going to be able to play at this level this year. I knew she would at some point, but I wasn't sure whether it was going to be this year. So we started early, 12 minutes here, 12 minutes there, 15, maybe 20 as we went along.

If you'd have asked me two weeks ago can Paige play 40-some minutes in a double overtime game, this past Monday night against as good a team as we've ever played in this tournament, I would say, no, she can't. But she got better and better as the game went on, and I'm glad that we have three or four days to get ready for the next one.

But she just happens to do things that are difficult to explain. Now I go by what she tells me and how she feels and what I see. So if I see that it looks good, I go with it. If I see that she's struggling, I take her out. That's the way we're going to operate this weekend.

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