

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

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Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

UConn Huskies

Geno Auriemma

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference

GENO AURIEMMA: Obviously last night was pretty -- I don't want to say remarkable ending, but to find our way here with the kind of game we played against a terrific team and a tremendous player, JuJu. Can't say enough about Lindsay and her squad, the job that she's done.

If you had asked me this a month ago, two months ago if we would be here, I would have said it would take a miracle. And yet through everything that was thrown at us -- I don't think anybody really realizes the magnitude of what we've had to endure the last couple of years. For us to be here in this place right now, to have this opportunity is pretty remarkable.

Q. Throughout the adversity that you went through this year, how do you feel like Paige's leadership has stepped up on and off the court?

GENO AURIEMMA: Sometimes necessity makes you do things that you're not comfortable doing. Paige naturally likes to just play and let everyone follow her lead. She expected everyone to work as hard as she does and to be able to accomplish what she accomplishes and see the game the way she sees it.

Going all the way back to high school when we were recruiting her, the need to be more vocal, to be more direct, and to really lead, that was evident she needed to do that.

I truly believe that this season was the time when she finally realized that, if she wanted to reach a certain level, that she was going to have to become a little more uncomfortable both at how many times she tried to score to take the pressure off our other guys and then vocally being the kind of vocal leader that we needed.

In addition to points, rebounds, assists, or blocks, I would



say that was probably her biggest contribution.

Q. You guys have had so much pressure you faced and I was just wondering what do you tell your players to both deal with that pressure and deal with some of the outside noise on like social media and through the press?

GENO AURIEMMA: We don't really talk about it that much, to be honest. I think it's inherent when you come here to play that things are different here. Somebody else getting to the Final Four is cause for a parade back home, and for us it's, hey, good job, guys.

For us each year you don't win a National Championship, it's considered a down year. One newspaper story where we couldn't make the Final Four last year was The Death of UConn's Dynasty.

So, yes, things are different here. The pressure's different at UConn. It takes a certain kind of kid to play here. It's the kind of kids that can block out all that stuff.

It's hard as hell today, obviously, with all the stuff that's thrown at these kids. So we don't do anything to shield them. We don't do anything to say, hey, don't look at it because that's silly. These kids need their social media like they need oxygen, so there's nothing you can do about it.

You can just try to help them focus on what we're trying to do every day, that the only thing that matters is what's happening in that building and the only people that matter are the people that are in that circle when we start practice. And we do our best.

I don't think there's any other group of kids that could have handled what these seniors have had to handle these last three years, and that just shows how tough they are mentally and how resilient they are.

Q. Congratulations on reaching the Final Four. With the day and the age there's about a thousand kids just in Division I that's in the transfer portal, you have zero transfers from the transfer portal. Iowa has zero



transfers from the transfer portal. I think South Carolina has two in their starting five, and North Carolina State has three. Do you think having no kids from outside of your program is an advantage? If so, what areas is it an advantage?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think there's a time and place for it. Last year we had Lou Lopez Sénéchal that had come to us from Fairfield after she finished her eligibility there, finished her degree. Before this portal stuff started, we had Dorka come from Ohio State. So we've had a few.

I don't necessarily think that's the way to go all out. Having three, four new starters every year can be very, very daunting. I've seen coaches pull it off, though, and do it successfully. I think how easy it is for players to go anywhere they want whenever they want has created a whole different dynamic, and each coach has to decide how they want to do it.

But I see a time and place for it, and it can help you tremendously, or it could backfire 100 percent. The reasons why someone might go in the portal are important, and you need to take those factors into consideration. To say that only teams that don't have portal players, such as us and Iowa, can be successful, well, obviously you mentioned two that are here that have been able to use the portal effectively.

It's just the world we live in today. You've got to make good decisions, that's all there is to it.

Q. Any advantages like during the season or during games, do you think, having a nucleus of your team that have been in your program for several years --

GENO AURIEMMA: Can be, sure. Sure. They know the language of the program. They know the system. They know the culture. They buy in, or they wouldn't be there. So yes, of course.

The disadvantage is we're playing one, two, three, four freshmen that another program might say, well, I'd rather not be playing four freshmen. I'd rather play four juniors from the transfer portal. So everyone makes their own value judgments of how they want to do it.

Who's to say that a few years from now we're not in that situation? I don't want to be, but I understand it 100 percent.

Q. It's been reported that UConn didn't really recruit Caitlin Clark. If that's true, why is that, and how do you think things might have been different if you had?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, there's a lot of kids we didn't recruit, and there's a lot of kids that don't want to come to UConn. I committed to Paige Bueckers very, very early, and it would have been silly for me to say to Paige, hey, listen, we're going to put you in the same backcourt, and then I'm going to try really hard to recruit Caitlin Clark. I don't do it that way.

Caitlin obviously is a tremendous player, generational player, but if Caitlin really wanted to come to UConn, she would have called me and said, Coach, I really want to come to UConn.

So I don't think that either of us lost out. I think she made the best decision for her, and it's worked out great. We made the decision we thought we needed to make. There's a lot of players coming through from high school that we see, thousands of them. You're only going to recruit some. You're not going to recruit all of them. Some people do recruit all of them. I don't.

I try to lock into who fits with us, try to lock in on them early. That's what happened with us and Paige. We felt really, really comfortable with that, and we went with it. Obviously in today's world that's a big deal. But those are decisions that are made every day, every year by every coach.

Q. She actually turned out pretty well.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I get asked these questions all the time, trust me, by my own fans. Let's say we get Paige, Caitlin Clark, JuJu, Kamilla Cardoso, Fulwiley, and that's our starting five. Who the hell would we play against, you know what I mean?

Q. I wanted to ask because I saw your quote about riding the wave with all the injuries you've had. What about this group has allowed them to stick together when you're only eight players deep right now? How have you rallied around those injured players, and what do you think is important for you and your staff?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, that's a Jamelle Elliott thing. I keep saying this can't last forever. I say in practice, I say in staff meetings, guys, this is like a house of cards. Any minute now this could all fall apart because we just have no options. We just have no other way to go. We only have one way, and if that way is closed to us, we have no way, we have no path.

But sometimes the wave breaks on you early, and you hit your head in the sand, and they take you to the hospital. Sometimes you ride the wave all the way into the shore, and it's the greatest ride of your life.

These kids, as I said, I think what happened to them two years ago, you know, you think about Paige, Nika, Aaliyah, Aubrey even, the struggles that they've had, starting with COVID, and losing players for a whole season, losing players for half a season -- everything that's happened to them has just made them stronger, it's made them tougher, it's made them come together more. There's a bond between these kids that's as strong, if not stronger, than any other group I've ever coached.

That's not to say that the talent -- listen, nobody's looking at our team and scared to death, going, oh, my God. This isn't our Stevy teams, our Maya Moore teams, our Diana and Sue teams, this isn't those teams. I tell them that every day. But at the same time, there's something about this group that the intangibles are what's carrying us right now, that grit, that toughness.

Will it hold up in the Final Four? I don't know. The Final Four, talent takes over in the Final Four. We'll see what happens, but that's been the story of this group for the last three years.

Q. Just one followup about Paige specifically and everything she went through with her knee. I guess how did you see that impact her? Did it change her tangibly at all to have to go through that and miss last year the way she did?

GENO AURIEMMA: If you think about it, she came in as a freshman, and we went to the Final Four, and it was a bubble. Her sophomore year she missed 15 games, I don't know how many games, and we were in the National Championship Game without our starting center. And her junior year she missed the season completely.

Now she comes back this year, and we're in the Final Four. So it's no coincidence that, when you have someone like that on the court, it changes everything about what you can do, and things become possible that weren't possible before that.

But she spent that year getting bigger, getting stronger, getting smarter, learning how to take care of herself. So the same freshman Paige, sophomore Paige that took us to the Final Four, that's not the Paige that's here today. Will that be good enough? I don't know.

She's done things this year that no one's ever done before. In the midst of all those great players, I saw a stat today that in the last 25 years, there's only two players that have averaged over 25 points, 8 assists or whatever, 8 rebounds, blocks, steals, and that's her and LeBron, all across basketball. But she does it in a way that doesn't

make everybody jump up and down, and she's old news.

That's the world that we live in today, and that's okay. That fits us perfectly, and it fits her perfectly. But there's something about Paige that it's hard to put words to.

Q. Congratulations on making it to the Final Four. How do you plan on getting the team mentally and physically prepared for this highly anticipated matchup?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I would say this. Physically, I think most teams this time of the year are physically beat up a little bit. I don't know that most teams have had to play all their players -- had to play their starters 40 minutes every game like we've had. So there's a lot of miles on our wheels here. So we'll see how we hold up, but I think we'll be fine physically.

Mentally there's not much you can do. You're either ready for this moment, or you're not. I can't do anything to make you ready. I can help you see through some things, but if you're the kind of kid that relishes this moment and can't wait for this opportunity and thrives under these conditions, then you're going to be fine. If you're a kid that doesn't, then you're going to struggle.

I think every kid knows what's at stake here. I think every kid knows, hey, this is the Final Four. Everybody knows who we're playing. It's time to go play.

Q. How do you plan on stopping Caitlin Clark?

GENO AURIEMMA: We don't. We don't plan on stopping her. Because I tried calling all the other coaches that have stopped her, and none of them answer the phone. So we're going to have to find a different way to win than stopping Caitlin Clark.

Q. I remember last time I interviewed you at the White House in 2016 and saw you during my AAU circuit in high school basketball. It's always good to see you. You spoke earlier this evening about how long of a journey it's been for your UConn teams who have overcome different things. As I'm on the brink of graduating college and my collegiate athletic career, I've had time to do singular reflection. I know you graduate players every year, so you're not necessarily thinking about the last four years the same way as I am, but could you talk about the last four years coaching such a dynamic class in Paige, Aaliyah, and Nika, and how you've grown as a coach?

GENO AURIEMMA: Every class has its own story to tell. They have their own journeys. A lot of it's what their

background is, what their makeup is. So you talk about Aaliyah, she's a Canadian kid. Nika's a Croatian kid. Paige is Minnesota. They all come from different backgrounds. They all come from different points of view. But they all have common goals.

They go to class. They work their butt off. It's important to them that they do well in school. I believe all three of them are over 3.0, dean's list students, and it's important to them that they give their best in everything they do.

It's been, for me, a fun experience watching them grow. Last night was a perfect example of that, watching them celebrate, watching the joy that they have being around each other. So, yeah, it's made me more appreciative obviously of the opportunity I have to coach kids like this.

Q. What are your thoughts on various companies going after athletes during this tournament in terms of offering them NIL deals? It seems like they're offering them more so now during the season.

GENO AURIEMMA: All these kids, they're professional basketball players in some ways. We want to pretend that they're not, but bottom line is they have agents. So if you have an agent, you're a professional. If you're an amateur, you don't need an agent, I don't think. So they all have agents. They all talk to a lot of different people in a lot of different walks of life. They have opportunities coming to them from all corners of the universe.

Is it distracting? Is it not distracting? Is it -- you know, I think it's exciting for some of these kids. They're going to get an opportunity to do some things that are really life changing for them. Some are going to get offers that are so stupid and so ridiculous and that, if they do it, it's just for the money, which I guess when you're that age, why not? I don't know.

But the world that we live in, everybody's for sale, and everybody can be bought. You've just got to hope that they have good people around them and guide them in the right direction.

Q. From a contractual standpoint, what's it like seeing fellow coaches get bonuses because of their accolades and advancements in the tournament? Unsure what your contract structure is, but any bonuses kicking in for you now that you've advanced to the Final Four?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I think everybody that has a job anywhere gets some kind of reward for their performance. That's the nature of work. You go to work and you do a really good job at what you do, and you get rewarded in

some way. Not everybody's contract is the same, not everybody's structured the same.

That's just the nature of it. It's no different than any other business. That's what this is. So the players are going to benefit when they do well, and the coaches are going to benefit when they do well.

Q. Your program's always been really good about keeping the kids who are hurt or redshirt or whatever they were doing in ball, but you've never had six of them. I don't know if you notice on the bench how involved, how active they are into this. How have you been able, whether it's the coaching staff, you, the healthy players, to keep them so involved when this has to be killing them because 4 of those 6 haven't played in a Final Four.

GENO AURIEMMA: That's the hardest part. Everybody talks about what players missing does to the team. So, yeah, you only have seven players available, let's say. Wow, it must be a real strain on those seven players that are available. But very few people talk about what's it doing to the ones that aren't playing, what effect does it have on them?

It's something that they've worked for their whole life as a basketball player to be able to participate in events like this, and so they can't. That exists through the whole season. They show up to games, and they can't play. They have to watch their teammates play.

They basically have two choices. They can sit and feel sorry for themselves and make it worse, or they can be engaged and still be on the team. So just because you're not playing doesn't mean you can't be on the team. That doesn't mean you can't be part of the team.

You always have a choice in life, right? Always is a crazy word, but most times you have a choice. You can choose to sit on the bench and be miserable, feel sorry for yourself, be bitter, jealous, envious, whatever the case you want to be, and act like a spoiled brat. Or you can engage and be part of the team and feel and experience, without being out on the court, the emotions and the feelings of the guys that are actually playing and then now you're getting something out of it. You know, you're actually winning. You're not winning the way you wanted to win because you want to be playing, but you're still winning. You're still feeling the feelings of a winner. That's important.

I remind them that all the time. You can choose to be one or the other. And I put a big premium on you'd better make the right choice.

Q. To follow up, I don't know if you saw the replay when Ice Brady made her three-pointer and how Jana reacted on the bench. She's got to be one of the toughest because she's been here the longest without playing. What does that say about her?

GENO AURIEMMA: You mean Ayanna or Jana?

Q. Jana El Aify.

GENO AURIEMMA: Oh, Jana. There's nobody that is enjoying life more than she is, that is totally engaged in what we're doing. Everything we do as a team, she feels as though it's happening to her.

I can't say enough about her as a person. Nobody has seen her play. No one at UConn nation has seen her play, and they don't anything about her. All they know is what they see.

Myself, the staff, the players, and everyone associated with our program has been really truly, truly blessed that she's come into our life because I can honestly say in 40 years I've never coached anybody better at Connecticut, never, in my life.

Q. I know the Final Four is already a big stage, but do you feel like it's more added height with Caitlin Clark and Paige going head up? Do you feel like it's adding more to it?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think that's the purpose, to be honest with you. I've always said that, if you have a certain kind of program -- and maybe that's why certain teams are always in contention to be in the Final Four. If you have a certain kind of program, you always have an opportunity to be in the Regionals because that's how your program is set up. That throughout the season you do things a certain way, your culture is a certain way, and it puts you in the Regionals.

Once you get there to the final eight game, generally speaking, the star power is going to take over, whoever that is. If you have one, great. If you have two -- I've been lucky. I've had three, four, five, all on the same team. If you don't have that person and generally don't have those people, you're not going any further unless you get lucky.

So now when you look at the Final Four teams, yes, those players stepped up. South Carolina is lucky. They've got the best of everything, of both worlds. They've got superstar players, and they've got multiple guys that could be that star power.

But I think the other teams, that's what makes the Final

Four. The individual brilliance that has brought teams -- those kids brought their teams to the Final Four, obviously with the help of everybody else. So that's why you've got what you've got.

This Final Four has all the makings of a tremendous Final Four, and whoever wins it is going to know that they won a pretty special one because it may be a long time before we see this collection of players on this stage all at one time.

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