

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

Thursday, April 4, 2024

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

**UConn Huskies**

**Coach Geno Auriemma**

**Aaliyah Edwards**

**Paige Bueckers**

**Nika Muhl**

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by UConn.

GENO AURIEMMA: I'm sure like every other coach, you know, it's a thrill to be here and have the opportunity to play. Some years it's like you're planning in October and you know that if everything goes right, you have an opportunity to play in this tournament on the final weekend.

And some years it goes according to plan, and other years your plan doesn't necessarily hold and you've got to make some other adjustments and other things that goes into zigging and zagging to try to get your team ready to play and all the pitfalls that happen.

And this year was certainly one of the most challenging seasons my career. And I have a lot of admiration and I'm really proud of my team, and especially these three, for everything they've been through the last four years. And for them to be here right now in this spot is probably one of the most gratifying things that I've had to experience in all my 40 years at Connecticut.

**Q. Paige, so much of the attention this season has been on Caitlin and how she's kind of elevated the game. That kind of attention was starting to be on you early in your career. I'm wondering how you feel about having that spotlight shift back to you or maybe grow larger and hotter on you next year?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think media coverage is important for the game. I think it grows the game. I think, I know freshman year I was like the media darling. Everybody



was focused on me and what I did at UConn my freshman year.

But I think it's more important for the game to share the spotlight to grow the game and show all the stars of college basketball and not just focus on one particular player, whether it be me, Caitlin, JuJu, Angel. There's so many names in college basketball now that are huge, that are stars that deserve credit.

And I think it's not my job, but the media can do a better job of just making sure everybody gets love, everybody gets not equal amount of attention but try to spread it out more.

So I honestly hope next year I'm not the focal point and the only person that gets attention. And I hope, as media, as players we can spread the love a little bit more.

**Q. Paige, you've talked about you wanted this so badly to have the big moment again last year when you were injured. I wonder, after winning the regional, did you ever get 5 minutes to yourself to kind of reflect on what you've done? And were you emotional again, or have you been just go, go, go and no time for that?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think after the game, when I got back to my hotel room, I actually processed what just happened and going through the entire journey and how it's all played out and just reflected on the whole entire year, to see where we are now was really rewarding and, like Coach said, gratifying.

I think definitely after the game your adrenaline is still going; you're so excited about the next steps, and we made it to the Final Four. But after we got back to the hotel, we sort of celebrated together, spent some time together. You really just soak it in and enjoy it.

**Q. Paige and Aaliyah, I'm curious, Nika does a lot for you guys that maybe doesn't get seen in the headlines, things of that nature. But how does she make the game easier for both of you when she's engaged, out of foul trouble and on the floor?**

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Nika does a lot for our team. I think



that she's just the steady beat that really helps us go, helps us slow down, helps us just play at the pace that we need to play at on the defensive end, controlling the pace of the defense.

And it's just a ripple-down effect all the way to the back line. I think she sets the tone.

And offensively, just her leadership and her controlling what we need to execute, what Coach asks of us to execute. And I think that she's just a great leader.

And being a senior and playing alongside her for our last dance, I think that she's really grown into this position and has come a long way. And more people should notice that.

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think she's just the calming presence on our team. Offensively, she gets us in our sets. She's just everything we need as a leader. She says everything she needs to say in huddles, and she controls what we do on defense.

Always takes the toughest assignment and doesn't care about the credit, doesn't care who gets what, and just shows up every day at practice as the same player and the same leader for us. So she makes everything easier on both sides of the floor.

**Q. Aaliyah, obviously there's been a tremendous focus on kind of the moment that women's basketball is having south of the border. A lot of people up here in Canada are keeping an eye on you. Could you talk a little bit about the impact that you think that this kind of moment might be having north of the border and how it might impact the game here?**

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Well, I'm just grateful for the platform that I've been given, playing at an elite school like UConn, because not only it's opened doors for me and opportunities for me, but also opportunities for, you know, those upcoming in Canada.

And I think the impact that I've been able to continue to lead after Kia came here was just showing Canadians that we cannot only be dominant just within Canada, but coming across the border and seeing how special you can get more opportunities in the NCAA and going for a scholarship and becoming a student-athlete and eventually going pro.

So I'm just grateful to be put in this position and kind of impact from a distance. I know I get a lot of support and a lot of love from home.

And even when, Coach made it happen where I had a

homecoming game in Canada, I think that was a big step for just women's basketball in Canada, because as our national team continues to grow, I think we're also just growing women's basketball in general. We're not only a hockey country, we're trying to be a basketball country as well.

So a lot of love up north, and I appreciate all of you.

**Q. Geno was talking on Tuesday, joking sort of how I tell my assistants it feels like a house, all year a house of cards, it's going to come tumbling down, whatever, talk about the injuries. But internally did it really feel like that? All the stuff you guys dealt with, did it feel like, in a weird way, it made you guys maybe tougher and brought out a resilience that maybe you weren't sure was going to be required when the journey started?**

NIKA MUHL: I would think both can be true. When you're dealt with so many things that are unexpected and you're kind of sick of all those injuries and all the challenges thrown your way, I feel like at first it's obviously a shock. It's a mourning stage that you have to go through with your team, with yourself.

But as the time goes on, you kind of realize that you can either sit here and keep mourning forever, or you can just step up for your team and play for the people that are also on the bench that cannot play. Because, you know, we are very lucky and privileged right now to be able to play and be out there because we know how hard it is to not be able to, especially some people like Paige that have been in that position before.

So, I'm sure we're taking every second to, you know, appreciate our time on the court, and I'm sure it made us tougher in the end. I mean, we're here. And nobody expected us to be here. And that only means that we used all of those things to make each other tough.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah, pretty much everything Nika said. I think one of the things that we learned is just leaning more on each other, playing more as a unit, and just playing for something bigger than just the win, or, as Nika said, playing for those who cannot play.

But also just trying to prove ourselves right, that we're still in this, we're still going to play the UConn way and we still hold ourselves to the standard. I know a lot of people are counting us out, so just playing with that extra motivation to play to win.

PAIGE BUECKERS: I mean, they said a lot. I would just say we kind of shifted our focus to not focussing on what



we don't have but just appreciating what we do, and just picking up each other, relying on each other's strengths.

The coaching staff has done a really good job of instilling confidence in us. We instill confidence within each other that no matter who we have, we're confident in the group that can go out there.

**Q. You guys have played Iowa two times in your careers. I know Paige wasn't in the one last time. Can you take anything from those games? Does it feel like it's just that the teams are too different? Or how do you view those experiences going into tomorrow?**

NIKA MUHL: I feel like it's definitely maybe a little helpful to have played them twice already. But at the same time, it's completely different teams. It's completely different -- it's going to be a completely different atmosphere.

It's a much more important game now. So I feel like once you count all those things in, I don't think you can really compare those previous two games to this one. But can we watch the game and take some things that we did well against them and that we didn't do well? Yes, of course.

But I feel like we're more focusing on us and our game. I feel like that has been the main point for us throughout this whole tournament to obviously study them and get our defensive/offensive plan. But I feel our game is what we're trying to get much more focus on. I feel like that's going to be the main point.

**Q. Dawn Staley used the term "held back" when talking about what the coverage of this sport used to be, not enough exposure particularly on a national level. Curious, as people who have grown up consuming it, now playing in it, how have you seen the coverage of this sport evolve?**

AALIYAH EDWARDS: It's evolved so much. Coming in as freshmen, we came in when it was bubble season. Not really playing in front of big crowds. Not really getting a lot of TV coverage.

I know from Canada, there was nothing streaming across the border, but now there's more coverage nationally, internationally, and just more people buying into women's basketball.

So I think it's just great to be a part of. It's a long time coming, and I think it's going to grow even larger.

**Q. Paige, there was a question a moment ago about your past games against Iowa. I know one you played against Caitlin, it was three years ago and the**

**circumstances were totally different, because of the pandemic and everything else. But what are your memories of that game? And given how long you've known Caitlin for, which she also talked about when she was up here, what's it like going up against somebody who you've known for so long, and I would think pretty well, in as big a spotlight as this?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: I remember freshman year, obviously the bubble. I think it was the Sweet 16 game. I remember Christyn having a really big game, us just playing a great team game. I think that's the game I slapped you on your butt. Yeah. So that was a fun game.

I know Caitlin. Of course, we go way back. Midwestern, we had a lot of battles in AAU and stuff like that, we played together on Team USA.

She's just a competitor. She wants to win. She has just intangibles of the game. She knows how to play, a great IQ. I think the biggest thing about her is she competes and she's just a winner, she wants to win at all costs. So I know going into that, it will be a great match-up.

But I'm excited. It's great for the game, and to be at this level, on this high of stakes, to see where we were in AAU competing against each other, it's just really cool to see.

**Q. Coach, you've had some of the greatest players in the history of women's basketball play for you. You've had some of the greatest teams. You've had the greatest streaks ever. I remember you saying at one point, no one is going to care unless we lose when those streaks, nobody is going to be put it on the top of SportsCenter or nationally. But it seems the last two years women's basketball as a whole is getting more attention than, some say, the men's tournament -- the players, the names and such, the ratings. Have you seen a shift? Have you seen something, like, we're finally getting attention we deserve, as opposed to needing something like a loss after 111 straight wins to get the attention that we're getting now?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I think when you're in the middle of it, you maybe don't see they, they say, the forest from the trees, or something like that. But during those moments where we were getting the majority of the attention -- I remember one time somebody asked one of the coaches before the NCAA Tournament, do you have a preference who you want to win the NCAA Tournament? And it was a long-time coach, too. And they said I don't care, as long as it's not Tennessee or Connecticut.

There was this point where people were, you know, dying for some other story line to appear. And there probably



were some story lines but nobody really wanted to pay attention. There weren't enough people that they could look into what all the other story lines were.

But now there's way more opportunities for story lines. There's more outlets for story lines.

I also think the women's game is benefitting, and is going to continue to benefit, from the fact that players are around long enough to create a name, create a buzz. People weren't even mentioning Caitlin Clark when Paige was a freshman. It was all Paige, Paige, Paige.

Now it's all Caitlin, Caitlin, Caitlin. Had she left after her freshman year, like it would have been if she was a guy, or if Paige left they would have had to find somebody else. And if that person wasn't there, then you wouldn't have had the ability to do all this that's happened.

So I think these players staying for four years, staying at the same school, hopefully, it gives it a chance to grow, and it gives people a chance to fall in love with these kids. I think that's been one of the biggest forces that I've seen from my vantage point.

I like how all these other coaches are getting a ton of attention and a lot of pressure being put on them to have to win. You know, they always thought I had it easy. Now they realize they wish they could go back to being anonymous. So I'm kind of relishing this.

**Q. Along those same lines, Geno, there have been so many phenomenal individual match-ups throughout this tournament. It seems like a large portion of the coverage is devoted to those match-ups. Do you think that women's college basketball as a whole has become more star-driven than in the past 10 years or so?**

GENO AURIEMMA: I believe so. It's a star-driven society that we live in. It's a celebrity-driven, star-driven, influencer-driven world that's been created.

And we always talk about the evolution of women's basketball and how we started so much later than the men did and it takes a little bit of time to catch up. And I felt like our run was described by other people as the UCLA time of the '70s.

And Magic and Bird, TV all of a sudden started paying more attention, people don't realize that when all those teams were winning all those games back then, there wasn't a lot of attention placed on them then. Final Fours in the men's side were being played in 18,000-seat arenas. And I'm not sure they completely sold-out.

Then all of a sudden those two particular players came on and it just lit everything up, and it just took off from there.

So it needs some stars. It needs people that have the right personality, the right game. And we have that now.

It's not that we didn't have it before. All those great -- just using an example -- all those great Tennessee/Connecticut games, they were all hall of famers playing against each other on a national stage. But it was then.

And now those same types of players are really benefitting from all of this. They've been there before, but it just feels different now.

**Q. Following up on that, we've seen times where it looked like women's teams or women's sports was kind of going to get over the hump -- '96 Olympics, some of your teams, the '99 World Cup. Does this feel different and why do you think that is?**

GENO AURIEMMA: I remember I didn't know how to feel when people, friends of mine and people just in general, would -- we would get 16,000 people for every one of our games because we had Diana.

And everybody said, yeah, she's the only player I like to watch because she plays like a guy. Like, that was the defining -- that was the validation that you needed to have in order for anyone to appreciate who you are, what your talents are, what you bring as an athlete, forget as a woman or as a man.

And fans of women's basketball were fans of their teams. So when it got to the biggest stage, if your team wasn't involved, there wasn't like a national consciousness of, hey, we need to watch this.

And I think it's gone beyond that, that now, because of what some of these kids have done, they've created a fan base of women's basketball that they'll watch a great women's game, regardless of whether they have a rooting interest or not in the game, that they will go to the game not just because it's their team playing.

But that's taken some time, but it's there now. And where it goes from here, I think it's going to be really, really important.

I think this is a -- it's a moment, like people are saying, but it's more than a moment. You know? Sometimes moments become minutes, and minutes become hours, and hours become days. And the next thing you know it becomes part of the national pastime.

**Q. You mentioned Paige's freshman year, it was all Paige, Paige, Paige. Had she stayed healthy, how do you think people would be talking about her today? Would she have the same profile, do you think, as Caitlin?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Same profile? They have two different types of games. I think when your team wins and wins a lot, I think you draw a lot of attention to yourself. When people say who's the best player? Well, who's the best team? It happens in the pros, right? Who is the best player in the country? Who is the most valuable player in America? Well let's go look at the best team and pick their best player, that's usually a pretty good guess.

And had we kept winning, you know, I don't know that Paige would be any bigger or less talked about, and I don't know that she would have the kind of impact that Caitlin's had because they have different personalities, different games. They approach the game differently.

And it works for both of them. So I don't know. But it would have been nice to find out.

**Q. With Paige and Caitlin, you mentioned Bird and Magic, they elevated the college game. That's when March Madness really kicked off. But then they took it to the NBA level and that grew. Can Paige and Caitlin do that for the WNBA?**

GENO AURIEMMA: They can. They can. But like I've said before, there were a lot of great NBA players before Magic and Larry Bird, so why didn't it happen? People didn't make it happen. So those two guys, because they did it in college and people saw them play a lot, they wanted to follow them after they left.

So the WNBA hasn't had the benefit of these great players that have come along. They didn't have the following. They didn't have the hysteria that these kids have. So there wasn't a "I want to follow them."

So hopefully this will change that narrative, but the WNBA is going to have to do a great job of marketing these guys. And the WNBA, I don't think, has done a great enough job of marketing their individual stars, for whatever reason, because there's been a lot of them.

And maybe now, I think it will change. But certainly they've laid the groundwork for it, 100 percent.

**Q. A lot of players might get caught up in a one-and-one showdown on national TV. What is it about Paige that will not allow her to get caught up in**

**that?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Who says it won't? Kids are competitive. They want the win. They know what's going on out there. They know who's who. They know what's what. And Caitlin comes down and makes a huge 3, don't think that Paige is going to pass the next one up and pass it to somebody.

So I think there will be a little bit of that. But it won't be -- if I score more points than Caitlin, Connecticut's going to win. It won't be that at all. And it won't be, I have to match everything that she does.

That's what I was saying, Paige's personality is such that she would rather score 10 points and us win than get 50 and us lose. So I think it's going to be about winning the game more than anything else.

**Q. Yesterday we had an opportunity, we were covering USA Basketball practice. And Diana Taurasi was there and. And we were talking about how there's always story lines and narratives, and everybody's saying, you guys aren't supposed to be here. And Diana assured me. She said, UConn expect it to be there. So I'm wondering if you can balance that story line of, hey, we're not supposed to be here, almost an underdog mentality, which feels weird for you, and for her to say, trust me, they expected to be there.**

GENO AURIEMMA: If you would have talked to me in June this year, I would tell you, yeah, it was going to be us and South Carolina playing for the national championship.

Then as things started to happen, I started to believe something different. You have to be realistic, and we live in a world at UConn where the expectations are unrealistic. But you have to be realistic.

You have to look at your team, and you have to say, do we have an answer for everything that happens? And if the answer's no, then you just have to cross your fingers and hope that thing doesn't happen, or those two things that you know you have no answer for.

So there's a lot of things we don't have an answer for in tomorrow's game.

Now, does that mean that we just wanted to hope we make the round of 64 and then see what happens? No, because our players will tell you this. They say playing at Connecticut is the greatest thing ever, but playing at Connecticut is hard as hell because if two guys foul out tomorrow, we're supposed to be able to compete five against three because that's the illogical, delusional

expectations that exist out there.

So there was always a, yeah, we can get there, but everything has to be done perfectly. And in my mind, I had a lot of plans for this weekend. It didn't include this.

**Q. Even with everything that you've accomplished and the program's accomplished in your time there, there's probably millions of people watching the UConn women's basketball game for the first time on Friday night. What do you hope they take away about you and about the program when they're reflecting on it tomorrow or Saturday or something like that?**

GENO AURIEMMA: That's the one thing that we probably -- we don't talk about winning a lot. We don't discuss winning a lot at UConn.

Svetlana Abrosimova, my Russian kid, taught me that. Coach, why do we always talk about winning the national championship. Everybody knows that's why we're here. So stop talking about it. So we don't talk about that a lot.

But we do talk about you cannot manage people's perception of you who you are, what you are. And the world that these kids live in, that we all live in, is everybody has an opinion of you and they don't know you. They have never met you. They don't know anything about you. So they see you one time and right away they formulate an opinion. Good or bad. Okay?

So there's a lot of people that hope we lose by 100 on Friday. And there's a lot of people that hope we win by 100. So there are some people that are going to watch us for the very first time and say, what's the big deal about these people?

And hopefully they see that we play basketball a certain way and that we try to conduct ourselves a certain way, and that our game looks a certain way, and that we are who we are and we compete. And what you think of us or what your impression of us is, I have no control over that.

But you know one thing that I've noticed over the years that's happened, when people see us play for the very first time, two things happen. One, they fall in love with all of my players because of the way they play and the way they conduct themselves. And they go, yeah, he really is a shit head. So those two things will still be true on Friday. And that's just my family. (Laughter).

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