

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

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Amalie Arena

UConn Huskies Coach Geno Auriemma Paige Bueckers Aubrey Griffin Kaitlyn Chen

Semifinal Pregame Media Conference

Q. With the transfer portal being open, are you guys getting texts from people, like, hey, good luck in the tournament, but what's it like at UConn?

PAIGE BUECKERS: No.

AUBREY GRIFFIN: No.

KAITLYN CHEN: No.

Q. Kaitlyn, what do you think are the biggest areas you've grown as a player during your season with UConn? And how do you feel that Princeton prepared you for all that you've gone through this season and for this moment?

KAITLYN CHEN: I feel like Princeton has prepared me really well as a leader. I feel like that's where I got comfortable using my voice and I feel that sort of translated over here.

Then being here at UConn, it's just a matter of getting comfortable playing within our system and finding the best places for me to succeed.

Q. Paige, right now you're on a tear, you're going wild right now. In your mind, do you feel like you're a pro going against college kids?

PAIGE BUECKERS: No, not at all. Just being present here. I'm still in college, it being my fifth year. Obviously I want to use my experience as an advantage and use that



to help myself and to help the team. But definitely no, just staying present here in college.

Q. The championship is the goal, but how did you kind of want to approach this one more run in this tournament? And, like you just said, you kind of really turned it up these last three. So personally how did you want to approach this tournament?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Just approaching it as one game at a time, one practice at a time, one weight room session at a time, and not looking too forward into the future. And going 40 minutes by 40 minutes and playing it by possession, I think focusing on the possession you're in will help you not worry about missed shots or mistakes in the past or worry about being anxious for the future.

But the possession that you're in is the most important possession of the season. If you approach every possession like that you'll have a sense of urgency to get everything right.

And just enjoying it, embracing it. Obviously it's my last year. It's all of our last year's here, so just being able to enjoy being here together and enjoy the little things like hanging out, saunaing together, cold tubbing together and eating together and doing all the little things that you sometimes take for granted, don't take them for granted and just enjoy them as much as you can.

Q. What challenges does UCLA present for you guys?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Obviously Lauren Betts, the size, what she does offensively, defensively, protecting the paint and being a force on offense, really carving space for herself.

But also what she does to get her teammates open looks with all the attention she draws. It's not just her. There's shooters sprayed around the outside, so you can't focus too much on one thing.

They're really versatile in what they do offensively and defensively. Got good size, good length. So they've got great pieces.



AUBREY GRIFFIN: I agree. They have great pieces, especially Lauren Betts on the inside. And I think if we do a good job of just -- we've got to play both and play their inside and outside. They have some great shooters too. I think they're very versatile.

KAITLYN CHEN: Yeah, everything the two of them already said.

Q. Paige, when you stepped into this program, it's a legendary women's program. Can you speak to, A, the pressure then, and did it ever diminish? How did it become or has it ever become just normal?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Well, I think before you even get here, you kind of know the pressures that exist by committing to UConn. So by making that decision to want to come here and try to live up to that and be a part of a legendary program, it's a decision you have to make even before you step on campus.

And once you walk inside the practice facility, you see all the history, all the names, all the banners, it's just motivation.

Obviously there's expectations here. And anything less than a national championship is really a disappointment. As players, that's what you play for and what you want to live up to. And the expectations and the pressure, it's a privilege. So we all look at it as such.

And we're just extremely grateful to play here under the best coaching staff in the world and the best program in the world. And we just wear the jersey with pride and want to live up to everything that the alums have done and that the coaching staff has done.

Q. Paige, when you were talking about not taking anything for granted -- the saunas, the food, everything like that -- how different is it from your first Final Four? Did you think you took those final moments with those teammates for granted?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I wouldn't say that. I would just say you just don't even recognize how important they are to life and how you're not ever guaranteed to get back there again, and having experience at the Final Four, how hard it is to get there, and how hard it is to maintain consistency throughout a long entire season.

Not that you take those things for granted, but you don't have the experience on how hard it is to get there. So just learning throughout the whole journey of the seasons, the ups and downs, the ebbs and flows, just taking none of that

for granted because it's all part of that season's journey. I would just say a more appreciation of it.

Q. Kaitlyn, when most people are transferring out the door right now, it's contentious. (Indiscernible) see it the other way; they tell you, you're done, good luck. So it's going to be a more friendly departure. Given who your coach is -- and also we found it interesting the other night that you did the same role that she did in '95, sort of a life saver in a key spot. But in leaving did he kind of -- granted he's an older guy now -- give you the book of UConn or whatever, whatever you can share on that when you were making your decision?

KAITLYN CHEN: She was definitely a very helpful resource as someone who played here and knows the coaches very well. But I just know that she had my best interests in mind, and she's someone who I trust tremendously and someone who helped me make this decision, for sure.

Q. Paige, I know this sport isn't easy on one's body. In your five years at UConn, what have you learned about taking care of your body? Wonder if you could speak to any body transformation you've seen in five years. I know you take more seriously strength and conditioning and nutrition. And a lot goes into that, I understand.

PAIGE BUECKERS: I would say the importance of eating, getting all three meals, of course, but also stuff in between. Sleeping, how important that is for the body and rest and recovery and making sure you're replenishing yourself with a good night's rest.

Pilates has been a game-changer for me in terms of getting all my body parts to work together as one. Everything is surrounded by the core. Making sure my core is engaged. Even activation, I was a person who just loved to tie their shoes and get on the court and play. But activating my muscles before participation.

So I mean a lot of things go into taking care of your body. And obviously strength and conditioning is one, is the main ingredient. But there's a lot of other things that are important.

Q. Paige, Geno alluded to this the other day, obviously Lauren Betts has talked about it -- the scrutiny and the pressure that comes with what you do and where you do it, how did you learn to kind of deal with that? I imagine there were times when it was even more than you thought it was going to be. How did you learn to handle all of that that goes around being a basketball player at UConn?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I mean, it's still a learning process, learning to care less about the opinions of others and trying to please everyone.

For every 500 people that love you, there's going to be five that hate you. So it's just focusing on the people that are important. And obviously there's a saying, like, you don't take criticism from people you wouldn't take advice from.

Making sure you're listening to the right voices. Deleting social media is a great word of advice as well. So just not paying attention to it. Not letting anything outside of this locker room, the program that we have infiltrate what we have.

Q. Aubrey and Kaitlyn, Paige has talked about a sense of urgency that she's playing with right now. I think we've been seeing that over the past few games. I wonder what that urgency looks like for the two of you and kind of how that shows up in your approach to the games?

AUBREY GRIFFIN: I think her sense of urgency rubs off on everyone, just how hard working she is. You can tell she's really determined. The traits that she brings to the game, it rubs off on everyone.

Her leadership is something that we all look up to her for. She's done a great job of just being that leader this year and it's overall been great.

KAITLYN CHEN: And I feel like when we see her sort of take it into the next level, turn the switch during games, it's pretty infectious. It's something you want to be a part of. You see her giving her all, so you want to give your all as well.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. Your friend, Jose Fernandez is about to become the president of the WBCA. Could you speak about your relationship with him, what you think he can bring to this role and what you think the WBCA's priorities are for the coming year?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, yeah, I've known Jose for 30 years now, almost. I think he's a tremendous coach, obviously, as everybody knows, but he cares deeply about the game itself. He's been involved in various committees. So he puts the time and the effort that it takes.

I was in that role, so I know it's a thankless role because you're trying to bring a lot of different agendas to the table and try to make them all go in the same direction. Not

always easy. Hopefully he can get the right people in the room to be okay with thinking outside the norm, asking the right people for advice.

There's a lot of administrators, there's a lot of coaches, there's a lot of ADs that they've been to multiple, multiple Final Fours with the men and the women. And I think a lot of times we say, just because the guys do it that doesn't mean we should do it. That's absolutely true.

We do something they don't do, which is we have quarters. They're the only people that bounce the basketball that play halves. We advance the ball so the game lasts longer. So you have longer, more opportunities to win the game. We did away with the one-and-one. We've come up with some great ideas that have helped our game.

But I also think we're sometimes afraid to look at what they do that enhances their tournament and see whether or not that fits what we want to do and not be married to tradition, I guess is what I'm saying.

I'm a big proponent, and I'm going to talk to Jose about this, bring the game to more people. By going to two regionals we've taken the game away from the people. And I think we need to bring it back to where more people can be in the stands.

And lastly, we need to change the schedule. We need to finish way earlier than we finish now so that we don't come here Tuesday night three thousand miles and then practice Wednesday and Thursday and play the biggest game of the year on Friday night at 9:30. And we were the last team to play on Monday. And the team we played was home Sunday afternoon. That just goes for whoever played in that game. I just happened to be that person today.

So we need to change the schedule so that we have more time. And maybe we need to finish on a different weekend than the men finish. Maybe we need to finish a week earlier. We do it for the conference tournaments, right?

There's a lot of things I want to talk to him about. He might be the one guy that will ask me. So that's not a bad thing.

Q. Cori was saying before, I guess, 13 years ago she came to watch you guys practice in the NCAA Tournament, I think she said Sweet 16 round. Then came back with her staff a year later. Could you talk about your relationship with her and the fact you were willing to open up at the biggest time of the year to let a coach who was new, so to speak, at a school come learn from you and now you guys are playing her on this stage?

GENO AURIEMMA: If I had known, I wouldn't have let her in.

Yeah, I just remember when I was a young coach, especially in high school, when I was a young coach in high school, I always admired the coaches that were open and willing to share their ideas.

I've never been one to want to hide anything or, oh, my God, they're competitors. And one of the funniest things that ever happened was three kids from Tennessee showed up for practice for like two or three days. They called ahead, obviously. They didn't just walk in.

But everybody thought at that time, oh, my God, this is like the Cold War, the Russians are coming. And it was so much fun for us, for them.

Basketball is basketball. You know? And it's our job to share it if we have anything that's worth it, and if they think that we have something that's worth it. You can't worry about anything else.

Our relationship -- and through USA Basketball, Cori and I got to know each other a little bit. And we both share a passion for wines. And so her energy and all that that she has, that she brings is just infectious, I think. And I'm glad when coaches have success. That's what we're here for.

Q. You've coached a couple of hall of famers at UConn and that number could double in the next couple of days. Wonder if you could give us your thoughts on the possibility of a couple of more of your players going into the hall of fame.

GENO AURIEMMA: It's so unbelievable that -- when you think of a 17-year-old that you're sitting there talking to and you're projecting them as freshmen and sophomores and juniors in college, and where do I think they could be, and how much impact they could have on our program and all those great things -- when they're there you realize there's something special about them.

And fast-forward, and then to look up and realize that their wildest dreams have come true. I mean, what kid doesn't shoot a basket when they're 10 and think about winning a national championship, winning a gold medal? And then somebody goes, you know, you're the best player in the country.

But I don't know that any one of those kids ever came to UConn saying, you know, I came here to make the hall of fame, to be inducted into the hall of fame. I don't think anybody said that. Maybe Diana did because ...

But for me to see what's happened out there with Rebecca and Swin and now Maya and Sue obviously being in the mix, that pretty much is bigger than, when you look back, than all the national championships.

They're hall of famers for me, they're hall of famers for their family, they're hall of famers for everybody -- they're even hall of famers for UConn haters. That's one thing they can all agree on. They're Olympian hall of famers. They're WNBA hall of famers. They're college hall of famers. They're hall of famers as people, most of all.

Q. Dawn was in here earlier and she mentioned that she wants or she hopes that college basketball would have its own TV deal to determine its worth. I guess where do you stand on that?

GENO AURIEMMA: Who said that?

Q. Dawn. The media rights deal.

GENO AURIEMMA: That women's basketball should have their own?

Q. Yeah.

GENO AURIEMMA: I thought they were doing stuff like that. I thought they were trying to spin it off. I don't know where that got. It probably didn't get as far as maybe it could have.

But we talk about that all the time. And we also -- it's funny because we talk about it in our league. We talk about it as UConn. How do we get more value for our brand? Is it worth more if you put it in collectively with a bunch of stuff?

So it's worth exploring, I think. When you put it out there you're going to have to be ready for, it may be smaller than you think and it may be three times larger than you think. It's best to find out instead of just keep wondering. So, yeah, I think that would be fantastic.

Q. Revenue sharing is probably going to be finalized and signed off on here in the next couple of days or weeks. What sort of impact do you expect that to have on your game and the types of programs that are able to compete for Women's Final Fours.

GENO AURIEMMA: It will ruin parity. That's number one. I'm for revenue sharing. There will be less parity in the game of basketball.

If you look at right now there's less parity happening every year in men's basketball. People talk about the same

schools in the Final Four seems like every year. And as the money now drives it, there's going to be less people that have that kind of money. There's going to be less of them that are going to want to give it to women's basketball.

So if the number of teams that could win the national championship, when it was us and Tennessee and everybody wanted anybody to win other than UConn and Tennessee. And then it kind of stretched, kind of stretched and kind of stretched.

Now you look at the landscape today and it's still a lot of the same teams, but there's a lot more vying for that spot in the Final Four.

Now that's all going to go away. Now it will become like college football, where in every conference, and as the conferences get bigger -- think about it, there's 18 teams in the Big Ten for now. I would venture to say eight of those teams will never get to the championship game in any sport. I'm talking about basketball, football, men's basketball, maybe.

So when you do those kind of things and it's money-driven, it's going to be, who is going to become the Dodgers and Yankees? And how many of those are you going to have and how many other programs in women's basketball are going to be Milwaukee and Kansas City? Because that's where we're headed.

And don't believe this 20.5 million salary cap. See, the thing in the NBA, if you go over the salary cap, there's a huge tax. There's a salary cap in revenue sharing in sports, in college. You think anybody in their right mind is going to stick to 20.5? That might be what's on the books. But that ain't going to be the final number.

There's nobody out there looking around to collect taxes on that.

And we play UCLA. They're really good. Just thought I'd throw that in.

Q. Kaitlyn obviously had a great Elite Eight. When you think what she's brought all season? And what's the biggest difference she's brought to the team and what gap has she filled on the roster?

GENO AURIEMMA: Maturity, experience. Things that we obviously lost when Nika graduated. She's a different player than Nika, different personality, approaches things differently, different skill set.

But in what we needed for this particular team, I think she's

been the perfect addition.

Obviously Sarah Strong was the biggest addition. I think Kaitlyn Chen was the perfect addition for what this team needed at the position that we needed it.

So you saw the other night in that game why it was worth bringing her in. And I've had a blast coaching her. Contrary to Ivy League students, they do have a sense of humor.

Q. There have been a few players, not from UConn, in this tournament run who have expressed they came from traumatic or toxic environments through other schools. You have a wealth of coaching experience and you obviously have players for decades that adore you. What do coaches need to do better?

GENO AURIEMMA: Man, oh, man, even if I knew I wouldn't tell you. I can share, but I can't share that much.

I just think this incredible pressure to win and the pressure, to your question about revenue sharing, the pressure to win is only going to get greater. You mean, I'm paying you guys and this is what I've got to watch? Somebody's getting fired.

So the pressure's immense. It's only going to get more pressure-packed. So how do you react under pressure? If you've been there and done that and you're secure, you just stay the course and say this is what we do. If you don't like it, tough.

If you're young and you're trying to make a name for yourself, and you're like close or not quite there, well, I can buy a team. It's better than recruiting one. I've got to wait forever for them to get better. I just go out and buy a team.

Now the kids all know they came to your school to get paid. And when everybody's getting paid and they find out who is getting paid what, and the animosity now between coaches and players -- you know, used to be players didn't like the fact that coaches had all the power. Now coaches hate the fact that players have all the power.

Players on the team hate each other because of what one is getting and the other one is not getting. All of a sudden, nobody's coming there to win a national championship; they're coming there to build their brand, to make their money; and, oh, by the way, if we get to the Final Four, wouldn't that be that cool?

Is that happening in every program? Hell no. I bet you 90 percent of the programs in America that's not the case. But the ones you're talking about, that's exactly the case.

Q. In Spokane, you said that Paige has a little bit of Diana in her. Could you expand on that? What about her on or off the court reminds you the most of D?

GENO AURIEMMA: Obviously there's a lot of similarities. There's so many differences as well. In the best sense of the word, number one, they're both exceptional con artists. They can spin things so that it goes their way about 99.9 percent of the time. So they live in that world, which I admire that because winners do that. They have to be right. They have to be at the top. They have to be unchallenged. So they've got that going for them.

They're both extremely outgoing. They both enjoy other people's company. They're accommodating to other people. They're respectful. They're great team players. They're both generous to their teammates, both on the court, off the court.

They have a flare for the moment. They can summon up something that's needed at the time when it's exactly needed. They take responsibility for what happens. They're not afraid of the criticism that might come if they fail. And I don't think anybody loves being in the gym more than those two.

If you asked them where's their happy place, they could be any place in the world at any time, they would say in a gym by myself doing what I love to do. And that's the best way I can describe both of them in how do they compare. Now, how are they different? That would be a whole different press conference.

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