

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

Friday, April 4, 2025

Tampa Bay, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

**UConn Huskies**  
**Coach Geno Auriemma**  
**Paige Bueckers**  
**Sarah Strong**  
**Azzi Fudd**

Semifinal Postgame Media Conference

UConn - 85, UCLA - 51

GENO AURIEMMA: I have to say that this was somewhat unexpected. You always go into these games this time of the year expecting it to be incredibly, incredibly difficult. Not that it wasn't, because I think our guys played about as hard as any group of kids can play, but I don't think we made a mistake the entire evening, especially on the defensive end.

I'm just incredibly proud of these guys and what they were able to do and how it was a complete team effort led by these three, obviously.

UCLA is just really, really good and really, really hard to play against. It took everything we have, and I'm really humbled by their performance tonight.

**Q. Azzi, an earlier explosion obviously offensively. Take me through what allowed you to break out in this way and how intentional it was for you to make sure that you were making your mark, especially on the offensive end here?**

AZZI FUDD: Thank you, but I think my mindset tonight was just to be aggressive, whatever that meant, starting on the defensive end. I think that was our entire team's mindset, trying to make things difficult for them and having that lead to offense.

So being aggressive tonight was my main focus, whether that meant making shots, just driving and kicking. And



having teammates that are always on you to shoot the ball makes it pretty easy to -- also when they're giving me great looks, setting me great screens, giving me great passes -- it also makes it really easy. Staying aggressive tonight, my teammates made it extremely easy for me to get the ball when I was wide open. So thanks to them.

**Q. Paige, shortly before halftime, Azzi whipped you a pass, and it looked like you shoved it right at Kaitlyn and she scored on a layup. Could you talk us through exactly what that was? And, Azzi, when you saw her do that, what did you think?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: It was kind of just instinct. Azzi through me the ball; it was a great pass. I saw almost, like, three people coming at me. I knew it was going to be a jump ball. At that point I just wanted to get a hand on it and find Chen because I knew she was running the floor with me. So just did that.

AZZI FUDD: I thought it was great.

**Q. Sarah, you come in as the lower seed. Did you need any expectation or any added motivation, because 35 -- that's not a bad season, isn't it?**

SARAH STRONG: I would say no. We just look at it as any other team. We're just out there playing basketball, not really worried about seeding.

**Q. Could you describe your role in tonight's victory? And how do you plan to maintain that momentum going into the championship game?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think we all just want to lock in defensively. I think that's all of our main mindset and our main goal as a team, to be super locked in defensively, talk, communicate, play with energy, effort on that side of the floor. And it translates into what we want to do on offense.

But being aggressive on both sides of the floor, hunting shots, hunting the paint, and then hunting to get steals, deflections, being disruptive. So being aggressive in all aspects.

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AZZI FUDD: Yeah, exactly what she said, being aggressive, making sure we're playing a full 40 minutes of aggressive UConn team basketball.

SARAH STRONG: Pretty much what both of them said, just being aggressive.

**Q. Paige, wanted to ask you, we know that your career is coming to an end on Sunday. It will be your last game in college. You've accomplished everything except that one thing. Can you talk about your view of this last game and finally accomplishing the number one goal when you came to UConn?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, we prayed, we prepared, and we hoped to be playing on the last day of the season. We got that opportunity. We don't want to take it for granted.

And you don't want to get caught up in the moment of being so anxious and trying to win the national championship in one possession that you're just psyching yourself out, but to be present with the team, to be where your feet are and try to win every single possession that's in front of you. Play the entire 40 minutes.

But that doesn't start until we start preparing and getting a good night's rest tonight, start preparing tomorrow. Be disciplined in our preparation and just enjoying the last couple of days we have here with each other. It's pretty crazy that it's all coming to an end, but I'm glad we can do it on the last day.

**Q. (Off mic)**

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think we all want it, and both teams want it. We all want it as individuals, as a team, yeah.

**Q. Paige, you just heard your coach say that he didn't think you guys made a mistake all night and that he was humbled by the performance tonight. I just wondered what goes through your mind when you hear your coach say something like that after this many years, that you feel like you've actually kind of won his final approval or what does that feel like?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: We haven't watched film yet. So that will probably answer that. But just trying to minimize our mistakes and try to make up for it with how hard we play and how much we communicate and fill the holes, fill the gaps of our defense and just the rotations.

But I mean we're trying to get better even from this performance for the game on Sunday. So just not being complacent with what we did tonight and trying to continue

to get better.

**Q. Paige and Azzi, you were up by 20 at halftime but you know UCLA is a good team and would be hungry to come back. What were you telling each other? What was the message from Coach to make sure you didn't take your foot off the gas?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Just to stay disciplined. We know they're well-coached. They're a very good team. They've got great pieces. There's going to be no quit to them.

To be able to keep our defensive pressure up, to have no foot-off-the-gas moments but we wanted to continue to press down and continue to stay disciplined and continue to talk and be disruptive defensively and continue to stay aggressive and get out on in transition on offense. Just talked about there be no letup and actually turning it up another level.

**Q. Azzi, this team has seemed to have gotten better every single game as the year has progressed. How is it possible that you guys seem to pull out your best performance game after game?**

AZZI FUDD: I think Paige just said it best, that we never get complacent with our performance. Like, tonight was great. We'll celebrate it the rest of tonight. When we wake up tomorrow it's a new day, a new scout, a new opportunity for us to play even better as a team.

I think just this whole season knowing that we're capable of so much more, the sky's the limit for us and making sure we tap into that every single night and we never get complacent.

**Q. Paige, if you could talk about El Alfy's performance helping you guys defend Lauren Betts, preventing UCLA and forcing lots of turnovers in the first half, and if that really set the tone for you guys defensively.**

PAIGE BUECKERS: I thought her performance was the tone setter for the night and how aggressive she started and how determined she started.

Coach has been on her. It's been hard at practice. We have great practice players that challenged her and are great, try to be Lauren Betts.

She's just been working extremely hard. And it was just extremely rewarding to see her perform that way tonight. And along with Ice, Sarah, Aubrey, the way they worked in the paint. Lauren Betts is a problem, she's not an easy person to guard. So for them to play with the effort that they did tonight, the attention to detail and discipline, it was

amazing to watch.

**Q. When you see that you have over 20,000 fans in attendance in a sold-out game like this and for the performance that you all had, how does it feel to know the impact you're having individually but also as a team on the women's game and especially for the younger generation?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: It's really rewarding just to be in this arena at this stage of the tournament, playing with these stakes and this environment. It was amazing for women's basketball -- the turnout, the support.

Just the display of basketball, it's really high-level basketball. And for us to have a performance like that tonight where we were playing extremely good team basketball, I think it's beautiful to watch. And I think it's great for the sport and great for younger girls to see. So it was a very good turnout and exciting.

AZZI FUDD: I like the word you used, rewarding, I agree with that. But I think it's an incredible feeling to know that you can have an impact on so many people. And also just the fact that so many people showed up tonight, spent their own money to get here, time out of their day to come and watch us play, I know we're all super grateful for that.

But to look around in the stands and see signs and just UConn fans from everywhere and we're really far from home, so to have that kind of support is amazing.

SARAH STRONG: Pretty much what they both said. Very rewarding.

**Q. Paige, Coach said UCLA is hard to play against but you made no mistakes. What was it about UCLA that challenged you guys? And how did you respond to that to finish the game the way you guys did?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Obviously their interior presence, with Lauren Betts, but they've got great pieces around her, great pieces off the bench. If you focus too much on one thing, it can cause a problem for the other.

So we wanted to take away the 3s, but we also wanted to make things hard for Lauren Betts inside.

So being disruptive, putting pressure on the ball to make the interior passes harder, just being there to help the rotations, trying to cover up for each other in the way we talked, communicated and covered up for each other I thought helped a lot.

**Q. Just considering today's team win, how proud are**

**you of all of your teammates today?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Extremely proud. We knew coming in we didn't think we played our best team game yet. We've had some great individual performances, but to be able to put it all together on a night like this where we're playing against a really good UCLA team, it's very rewarding. It's the kind of basketball that we want to play. So extremely proud of everyone.

AZZI FUDD: Also incredibly proud of everyone.

SARAH STRONG: Also very proud of everyone. We worked really hard for this.

**Q. UConn is one of the greatest sports dynasties, UConn women's basketball, one of the great dynasties talked about as such. But it's been almost 10 years since a title has been won by the Huskies. Is that a motivating factor for you?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think we're not worried about the past. We're worried about trying to -- I mean, every single day you walk into the gym, you're trying to live up to the standard of playing UConn basketball, but you're not comparing yourself to other teams, to players before. Obviously you want to fill their shoes and make them proud and wear the UConn jersey with pride.

But we are trying to be the best team we are in the present on any given night. We're continuing to get better in practice, in the weight room and in everything we're doing. That's the main focus, staying disciplined and doing what got us here and taking care of that.

**Q. Paige or Azzi, Sarah Strong has been a consistent player, really strong player for you guys all season as a freshman. What do you make of her being able to keep that composure and that confidence even as the stage gets bigger and the lights get brighter?**

AZZI FUDD: Sarah is an incredible player, but I think that's something that impresses me the most about her is just how mature she plays and how even keeled she is. You can never know if she's got 20 points and 20 rebounds, you wouldn't be able to tell.

I think I definitely look up to her in that aspect and how she doesn't care. She looks at her opponent as just another game that night. Doesn't matter where we are, what stage we're on.

So I think that's something that I want to take and apply to my game. But she's someone who is extremely fun to play with because she is just so smart. She knows the game,

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knows what to do, and she just makes it easy to play with.

PAIGE BUECKERS: You can't really say enough great things about Sarah Strong. She just contributes to winning in so many different ways. A lot of things sometimes don't show up in the stat sheet, but everything she does also shows up in the stats sheet.

She just has an impact on the game. And it's funny because she's so mature, cool, calm and collected on the court. But as a roommate she's pretty wild off the court. Just to see the switch-up is pretty fun, too.

**Q. You and Pat Summitt certainly put women's college basketball on the map, and I know you've beaten all comers. How do you feel about what you've accomplished at this point with the amount of titles you've amassed? And would it be even more gratifying for you knowing that there's transfer portal and NIL factored into what you could potentially do on Sunday, because this is a remarkable accomplishment what you have done for this sport to me is nothing short of outstanding and remarkable. It's a privilege to be have an opportunity to talk to you, Coach.**

GENO AURIEMMA: I appreciate all that. The challenges certainly don't get any easier. It's not the same game, not the same environment, not the same experience that it was when we first started in this. All the coaches that are still around, it's not many of them, trying to navigate all the changes has been incredibly difficult on all sides, not just the coaching side.

The championships that we have, they were won through the '90s, the 2000s, the 2010s. The Final Fours happened in the '90s, the 2000s, 2010s, 2020. We've had to navigate a lot going through this. I'm pretty gratified as it is.

I think if we win a 12th national championship, I don't know that that has any impact on my life whatsoever other than it makes me feel that I'm still able to have an impact at my age and for how long I've been doing it. So it doesn't impact my life that much.

But it certainly impacts her life and what she wants and what she's been dreaming about since she picked up a basketball (referring to Paige). So anytime you can have a hand helping someone who, when you were talking to them when they were 17 years old, about what could happen if you come to UConn and you're in a position to actually be able to do it, I think that's the most gratifying thing for me at this stage in my life.

**Q. Since the paper you grew up reading didn't seem to necessarily say Jonathan, the fact that you're playing**

**the other team and who the coaches are and they're going for a back-to-back, and the way you've been roaring, and this is going to be like the Super Bowl in women's basketball Sunday, could you see yourself in the Eagles role?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I think certainly what's happened at South Carolina over the last seven, eight, nine years, they've played basketball at an exceptionally high level. When you think about the Final Fours they've been to, the consistency in their program and the ability to win national championships multiple times and to be in a position to win back-to-back ones, these are all things that are incredibly difficult to sustain in today's day and age.

We've certainly played each other a number of times in big, big games. We've already played each other once in a national championship game. So it does feel like the two most prominent programs right now in women's college basketball are playing for the right to be national champions.

And we both deserve it. They deserve to be here. We deserve to be here. They have every right to win Sunday. We have every right to win Sunday. Past performances, what happened last year isn't going to be a factor on what happens Sunday. Our 11 national championships aren't going to help us win on Sunday.

So the fact that we have Philadelphia connections University of Virginia connections and all that USA Basketball stuff that we've done together, yeah, it's a nice story. But I don't think Dawn's going to give me any kudos or any breaks for the senior citizen that I am. I don't think she's going to have any sympathy for me come Sunday.

**Q. I think all your titles you've won you've had sort of three major players at the time -- Stewy, Maya and Morgan. You had Maya, Tina, Renee and of course Diana and that group. You have three now obviously that are playing really, really well for you. How big is it for the game on Sunday? And as far as the win tonight having the three that can all dominate a game, score 20 points, do what you need to do -- the last couple of years you made it this far you didn't have enough healthy players like that to have the three.**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, there is a common theme that goes through all of our national championship teams, and that's absolutely true what you're saying. If you want to -- Hank Stram said this years and years ago -- there may be a few other people here who knew who Hank Stram was -- but he did say, in order to win it all, you have to have it all. And if you show up missing some pieces, it's going to be exposed here on this stage this weekend.



And when we showed up generally speaking with the right pieces, we were able to, more times than not, win a championship. When we showed up here shorthanded, we didn't.

Going into this weekend, we felt we had the best opportunity that we could have in the last five, six years, seven years, maybe, six years, I don't know -- and that it wasn't relying all on one person and that person had to play exceptionally outstanding game in order for us to win it all.

If Paige had 16 last year, we wouldn't have made it to the Final Four. If Paige has the kind of game that she had today in the previous couple of years, it would be almost impossible for us to win. And yet today, you know, look what happened.

So we have more pieces. That obviously has the majority of the reason why we're here. And I don't know that you can do it -- I've said this before -- you know, we go two, three years in Connecticut without winning the national championship. I can imagine it's like nine now. This is nine years without winning a national championship.

I remember after three somebody said, you know the only time he wins is when he has the best players. I was like, man, know, I tried with the other guys. It doesn't work. So you have to come here with really good players and put yourself in a position to do it.

They've done that. South Carolina. We've done it. So it should be a great Sunday.

**Q. You were talking about, when you were recruiting Paige, talking about national championships, what could have done or what could be at UConn. Once she got to campus how much have you talked about a national championships? And since this is her last season how much have you talked about a national championship with her?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Not a whole lot, to be honest with you. Not a whole lot. When she got there, it was the bubble. I didn't think we were necessarily that great a team. You couldn't even tell because it was so awful to play that season and didn't feel like college basketball.

And then every year that she's been here, I never felt like we really were able to overcome anything and win it as long as she was on the court. I never felt that.

So the only time I've ever talked to her about it is when I want to make her mad and be negative with her. Every

day in practice when she does the dumb things she did as a freshman, that's the only time I bring it up.

That's you've never won a national championship and you never will! Stupid things parents say to a kids.

As a reminder that each and everyday and year you need to put away the things you did as a freshman and sophomore.

Even though we had no chance to win it those years, because didn't have enough players, but just trying to remind her -- that's why she has been saying -- all we've talked about the whole time she's been here is that you need to get better every day. You need to grow every day, need to get better every day. And keep the focus off the national championship.

I stopped talking about national championships when Svetlana Abrosimova -- I want to give her a shout-out; recently going through some rehab on some tough surgery in Russia -- I used to talk about national championships once a week when she was on the team. Finally she said to me, as only a Russian can, Why do we talk about championships? Everybody knows why we were here. Stop it.

So I stopped it because I was afraid for my life. (Chuckles).

**Q. Earlier Paige talked about how important preparation will be going into Sunday's game, just doing those little things. Can you tell me what preparation looks like for you and your coaching staff going into Sunday?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, my preparation really is listening to what our coaching staff says to me about what they think based on all the film and everything that they've done, what they think is the key for us to win. I have a great staff. All of them have been head coaches at one time. And I trust them.

So we'll talk about it. We'll get together and come up with a plan. It won't be tonight. It will be sometime tomorrow. It's 12:23. I'm an hour short.

I'm cutting into the one thing that I do have control over, what wine I'm drinking tonight. But how we're going to play South Carolina, I'm waiting to hear from my staff on what we're going to do.

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