

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: UConn vs South Carolina

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Amalie Arena

UConn Huskies Paige Bueckers

Finals Pregame Media Conference



Q. You've talked so much about how you're just taking everything one day at a time and staying in the moment. But when there's so much hype happening around you, we're all asking you about, oh, this is your last chance in your career and all this stuff, how is that actually possible? How do you do that?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Well, honestly ever since postseason started, it's always been a game of this could be the last game of my career. So just knowing that and taking one game at a time, taking one 40 minutes at a time and staying present, I think that's the most important thing for our team, for us as individuals.

It's hard not to worry about the future, hard not to think about the past, but the more you do that the harder things are for you. So as much as you can, just trying to stay disciplined and being in the present.

Q. What would you say makes Geno's personality really unique? Why have you been able to have such a great connection with him? And just what does that relationship mean to you personally?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I mean, he's very quick witted. He has a great sense of humor. He has a good sense and a feel of knowing when to push and when to give. He does a great job of getting on his players' nerves but also knowing when to be there to support them and be there to instill a little bit of confidence in them.

He's just super easy to talk to. We've had the pleasure of just having a great relationship and talking about anything -- basketball, non-basketball -- going over to his house for dinners and just being around him constantly, just going up to his office to chat.

And it's meant everything to have that relationship with

him. I'll never take it for granted and just being able to be that connected with somebody, trust somebody that much and vice versa. So very grateful for that.

Q. How would you like to be remembered for your career at UConn?

PAIGE BUECKERS: As a great teammate, a great leader. I think those are the two most important things to me, just being somebody that people love to play with, make their teammates better, wears a UConn jersey with pride.

Every single time I stepped on the floor I gave it my all and played with energy, effort, passion and joy that was contagious, not just amongst my teammates but in the entire UConn community.

Giving back to the community was also a huge thing for me, just giving to people who have given so much to me. And just being an inspiration as much as I've had adversity throughout my career, a person who was resilient and just bounced back from everything that life threw its way and a winner and a competitor and just a person who played with all my heart.

Q. You and Azzi have shared some of your highest highs and lowest lows together on and off the court. What's it mean to be back here in the championship game with her?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Just having those bonded and shared experiences with each other -- trauma, good stuff, bad stuff, celebrations, sad days -- it just bonds you immensely and it just makes you so connected that anything you go through in life, as long as you've got the people around you you feel you can get through it.

To be here at this stage, to both be doing what we love after all we've both been through, I'm sure if you asked her, she wouldn't change it. I wouldn't change it just because of how it shaped us and how it's shaped our mentality, how it shaped our faith and belief in everything that happens for a reason. So to be here at this stage is really rewarding.

Q. For the South Carolina seniors, this is their chance

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to win their third title in four years, which is -- you know how hard it is to even get to this point. What does that say about the leadership that they have on that side? And how much respect do you have for what they're trying to do? Obviously I know you're competitors, but ...

PAIGE BUECKERS: A lot of respect for them, the program, Coach Dawn. Sustained excellence is extremely hard, especially with the parity in women's basketball today. So for them to continue to get back to this level, we know as players, is extremely hard to get here. You never want to take it for granted.

But it speaks to the discipline and the attention to detail and the demanded excellence that Coach Dawn has for her players. And we have great respect for her and the entire program. So just to sustain that excellence is extremely hard to do.

Q. What do you take from the game you had against them two months ago? Is there anything you guys can use tomorrow? And from the title game a couple years ago, what memories do you have from that? Does that help add to, hey, we were in the spot before; we weren't what we have now or we can take some things from that at all?

PAIGE BUECKERS: We don't want to think that whatever we did in the past, good or bad, will help us tomorrow. But obviously using the experience in what we learned from those experiences, I think I've always talked about and we've talked about as a team is our defense.

We want to continue to do that, make them as uncomfortable as we can, limit their 3s, limit what they do inside the paint and try to disrupt everything they do offensively.

And just be aggressive on both sides of the ball. Look to get 3s, but look to score in the paint, get paint touches, which leads to stuff on the outside, and just play with energy and a passion and leave everything out on the floor.

Q. Which current player on your team do you think will make a good coach?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Make a good coach? Hmm. That's a good question. I'd probably say Caroline Ducharme.

Q. To go back to that 2022 championship game, how do you remember that loss impacting you? Is that something that you're using at all coming into a rematch with this team now kind of on the other side of

the adversity you've been through the last few years?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I think everything in life has kind of taught me not to take things for granted. Being in the national championship game, it's extremely hard to get to and extremely rewarding to be a part of.

And just how much we need to play 40 minutes and how connected we need to stay throughout the game. It's going to be a game of runs. It's extremely high stakes. There will be nerves at the beginning.

But once you settle in, staying connected, staying composed and doing what got us there, not trying to get too outside of ourselves and try to win the game in one possession but play every possession by itself and take it possession by possession.

Q. You know what it's like to be a freshman with high expectations and you lived up to that as a freshman. Can you talk about what Sarah's done this year as a freshman and just how reliable she's been throughout the season?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I mean, Sarah's amazing. Obviously when you watch her she doesn't play like a freshman. She plays like an experienced vet. It's just her basketball instinct, her basketball IQ, her being able to be unaffected by anything that goes on in the game.

And she's just always the same. She's very consistent. We know what we're going to get with Sarah. And she's had, I think, one of the best freshman seasons ever in terms of what we've asked her to do, what she's done, how she's lived up to that standard every single day.

She just contributes to winning in so many ways. I've said it before, but just her impact on the game is remarkable.

Q. I was wondering, how do you mentally prepare for high-pressure moments in a game?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think leaning on your preparation, doing what got us here. I know the coaching staff, our practices are extremely hard, the way we prepare in the weight room, the way we prepare by how we eat, how we sleep. You're just leaning on that.

I have a faith in God that I believe everything happens for a reason. And everything is in His hands already, so just leaning on that, leaning on His strength, leaning on His comfort and leaning on the preparation.

Q. Last few games, different players have stepped up at different times for periods of times. Are those



planned changes or is it just the flow of the game?

PAIGE BUECKERS: It's just the flow of the game. That's the UConn basketball way, that on any given night it's anybody's night. So we feed off of that. We feed off of what the game's calling for, who has the hot hand, and just feeding off each other and wanting to make plays for each other. And anybody on the floor at that time we think can be that person. So definitely what the game calls for.

Q. The last time you all saw South Carolina you beat them by 29 points. How do you go into this game not feeling too comfortable?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Obviously we feel like they'll have a chip on their shoulder from the last time we played. But at this point in the season, nothing that we did prior matters. You shouldn't need any extra motivation when you're playing the national championship game. So the record is 0-0.

What we did in the past can't help or hurt us. We can obviously learn from it, use those experiences. But two teams trying to win a national championship. So you don't want to get complacent and you want to go into the game confident but definitely respecting the opponent and how great they are.

Q. Just going back to the 2022 title game, what do you remember about how you were feeling in the lead-up to it, the morning of? How did you sleep? How were you feeling nerves-wise, your preparation? Anything you remember just about the lead-up to that game?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I don't remember much, but I would definitely say a feeling of anxious, excited, a little bit of nervous. It was the first national championship we had played in at my time here. So definitely excited, definitely nervous, anxious. Probably all those feelings.

Q. I think it was the Elite Eight game at halftime, Geno basically said he has to beg you to shoot sometimes. So can you kind of talk me through your mindset of, I guess, what has changed for you or if you feel like anything's changed in terms of hunting your shots and kind of what that mindset shift was, what was it before and what is it now?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I mean, I feel like he still has to beg me to shoot sometimes, but that's just the UConn way. It's the way I love to play -- being selfless, feeding my teammates, making sure everybody's getting involved.

At the same time the game at the moment might call for something different. It might call for me hunting my shots

more, getting to my spots more, being more aggressive, looking to score.

You always realize when you look to score, and aggressiveness, look to score, it opens up everything else for your teammates as well.

Just finding the balance in that. And every game is different. So not going into a game predetermining what I'm going to do but reading what the game calls for.

Q. Two people that you rely heavily on, admire, Sue and Maya, in the hall of fame now officially. Your thoughts?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Obviously well deserved. Two of the greatest to ever play the game. Two people I have a great relationship with and great respect for.

Growing up in Minnesota with the Minnesota Lynx dynasty, Maya Moore was my everything. That whole dynasty and the whole team was. And those are shoes, both of them, that I aspired to fill.

So to be able to be here at UConn, build that relationship with them and to see their greatness firsthand in how much they've impacted that program, and you can see their imprint on it every day.

They're the greatest pros, the WNBA, the Olympics, they just represented the women's game extremely well. So very much deserved.

Q. First, your reaction winning the Nancy Lieberman Award for the second time? And what are you expecting tomorrow that Azzi will be healthy for the national championship game this time?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Very blessed, very honored. Give all glory to God and my teammates and coaching staff, everybody who has invested in me -- the doctors, the training staff, practice players, managers, GAs. Everybody, it takes a village.

It's really a team award in my eyes. I have great respect for Nancy Lieberman. She's a great mentor to me. She's a sister in Christ. Her imprint on the game and how much she's done for the game, extremely grateful for that.

The second part? Just excited to have her healthy, to have her being her best self and to have her aggressive, to have her playing with joy and passion after all that she's been through three years ago, two years ago, last year. So extremely proud and extremely happy for her.

Q. I know it's a tight schedule. You're in the gym. You're at the hotel. Not a lot of free time. But have you been able to get the vibe of the place at all being here in Tampa and what's going on in town? And anything you'll remember about being here beyond these games?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I remember being here, I think, it was like my junior or senior year in high school, being here at the Final Four, the environment was crazy. Just the turnout was crazy and the games were really high level. I remember watching it and being here for that.

But even now, the turnout, the people you see walking the streets of Tampa, all here to support women's basketball. The turnout yesterday was amazing. It was an amazing atmosphere, a great environment for women's basketball.

Obviously the weather is great. We're not used to that in Storrs. It's a good shift in that. Just all around great vibes here in Tampa.

Q. It seems like another lifetime when you guys were having your first NCAA Tournament experience together in the bubble. There was one moment, I think against Iowa, you hit a shot and slapped your coach on the rear side. Did you always know you would have kind of a playful relationship with him like that?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, it was Anna Makurat three, and he'd been giving Anna a hard time in practice leading up to that. Just to let him know that when he's wrong and just to give him some crap sometimes is always a joy. However that comes out at the time, you always enjoy just the back and forth to it because he gives us a lot of smoke. It's nice to dish it back sometimes.

Q. The other side of that, he said the other night when asked the impact of winning another title to him would mean nothing but to get one for you would be huge. What would it mean for you guys to win a title for him in a sense, who knows how many he has left to win, to get him a chance to get him a 12th?

PAIGE BUECKERS: He's one of the last of his peers who are still in his game. We think he can still win at this level. He still thinks he can win at this level even though the landscape has changed so much, and it's an entirely different environment than when he first stepped in than maybe even 10 years ago, maybe five years ago.

He's given us so much. He's given us the opportunity to play here, to compete for national titles, to be in the UConn program. So to give back to him means everything.

Q. Once you win the natty, who is the first person you will call?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I mean, we haven't won it yet. I'll let you know after we get there.

Q. We often ask special players if they feel like they need to win a national championship to validate their legacy, their place in the game. Do you feel that? Or do you feel that everything, all of the things that you've done are enough to cement who you are and what you've done?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I don't think that's up to me. I think that's up to the people who, I guess, get to decide if people's legacies are cemented or whatever. But I'm not worried about that at all.

The thing I take great joy and great pride in is the relationships, the experiences, the journeys we've gone on throughout the team. Just the bonds I've been able to create with my teammates, the memories, the close-knit stuff that, I mean, you can't really experience without support, just how it's brought us all together and how much we've grown as individuals, grown as a team. All the stuff we've been through and how much it's made us stronger.

So really the journey is the reward for me. And I never take it for granted being able to play here and put on this uniform.

Whatever talks of legacy and whatever, I guess that's not up to me. All I can worry about and control is who I am every single day and who we are as a team. That's all I'm worried about.

Q. This is obviously everybody's asked you about the game. Everybody is asking you about basketball, but I can't help but notice, you're very eloquent. You very much know your basketball history. You care about the game itself. Outside of your WNBA aspirations, is there anything else you aspire to do in the basketball space?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Well, thank you. First, I love talking basketball. I love learning about basketball. I feel like my whole life has been about it, around it. So I would love to do anything that stays within the game. So just talking hoops, however that looks like.

I think I'm too reactive to be a color commentator. I have too many -- I don't know if I could keep it cordial. I don't know about that. But maybe in a studio setting where I have time to process things, it would probably be a little bit better.

Q. Did you meet Sarah when she came to visit UConn as a recruit? And also having been recruited by Geno, what does he do that's maybe above and beyond that allows him to land players like Sarah?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I met Sarah, she went on an official visit, and we hosted her. It was a great weekend. She was extremely shy, how she is in front of the media for the most part and not very talkative. Once you peel back that shell, she's a whole different person.

But I think the difference with Coach in terms of why we wanted to come here is obviously the history and the excellence that he's produced, but just his honesty. He doesn't sugarcoat things. And as soon as he starts recruiting you, he's going to start coaching you. A lot of times they're things you don't want to hear and things people have never told you.

So I think that's a separator for sure is his honesty and his ability to be a non-sugarcoater.

Q. You said you were here in 2019 for the Final Four. I don't think USA (indiscernible) was doing their minicamps yet. Was that a family trip or a trip with friends?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think I was here for USA Basketball 3-on-3, an event or something like that, but I was here also with family and friends.

Q. We see, of course, you're a star on the court. I showed you a picture of yourself years and years ago when you first started playing. When we peel back the layers, who is Paige outside of basketball?

PAIGE BUECKERS: A lot of people would describe me as like childish, annoying, extra -- all of those things. But extremely loving, caring, annoying. I love to get on people's nerves and just bother them and be a gnat. But it's all out of love.

I just feel like I love having fun. So however that looks like, just being joyful, being in a state of gratitude always, just embracing everything that comes my way and try to be a joy to be around.

Q. You were extremely open about your faith and how you depend on God to get you through your career as an athlete, but just also your life. If you had to name the chapter that God is writing for you right now in your life, what would the name of that be?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Stand firm.

Q. How have you seen your leadership change from your freshman year to senior year? You're in a leading role your freshman year obviously right out of the gate. How do you feel like you've grown since then?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think being comfortable using my voice. With experience and with age you get more comfortable using your voice. And I think holding people accountable, I used to look at it as a bad thing. Me getting on my teammates and demanding excellence out of them was a negative. And it's not me picking on anybody -- instead of calling people out, it's calling people up. And that hold yourself to a new level of accountability for yourself and knowing you can't call your teammates out on something if it's something you're not doing yourself.

So balancing that. Just leading by example in how hard I work on and off the court and how much I invest myself into the game and how much it's my whole life and my whole being, and just giving everything I have to it.

And then connecting with people off the court, I think, people trust people way more when they actually have a genuine relationship with them, and trust is a huge key piece to basketball.

So connecting with all of my teammates, just going to the rooms, chatting about stuff when somebody is going through something, just being there to support them. So all in all being connected with my teammates and using my voice.

Q. As you said earlier, when you're in a tournament, every game potentially could be your last game. But Sunday will be that. Do you compartmentalize that a bit, the motion of it? Or do you feel like I'm ready for the game, the next chapter? Is it one or the other or a mixture of both?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I prayed about it. We all hoped to be playing on the last day. That's all we can really ask for. And just showing up and giving everything to that last day.

I'm probably going to be sad regardless of the outcome just knowing that my college career is over and this is my last time wearing the UConn uniform so just enjoying that, embracing it and making sure I have nothing left to give after that game.

Q. Azzi was in the other room talking about the championship where she was sick. And she said this time she'll be able to help you. What's it been like, as close as you guys are, to be able to watch her journey and through the injuries and being sick that time and

now kind of getting to this one more chance, especially with you and kind of coming off the way she played last night?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Azzi has done a remarkable job of overcoming trials in her life. And however that looks like, injury, illness, whatever it is we know nothing beats Azzi.

She has an incredible work ethic that we think anything in life, anything life throws at her, she's going to overcome it and work through it and work her butt off to get over it.

So just to be a part of her journey and watch how hard she's worked and watch how hard she's worked to get through everything and how much it's only made her a better person and only made her a better player and how much it's changed her perspective on life and her faith, just to see it is very rewarding. And you're extremely proud of her and extremely happy for her.

Q. You used the word "annoying" to describe both yourself and Sarah Strong. I'm curious what are similarities you see in her that you might have had as a freshman in the way you went about your business? And what do you think is her long-term potential?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Very similar and very super unserious off the court and pretty much serious for the most part on the court. And just the joy and her competitive spirit. I think there's a lot of similarities. The sky's the limit for her. I think the foundation she's laid as a freshman is unreal.

The fact she's only going to get better is extremely scary. I can't wait to watch her progression and the way she continues to work through her game to get better because I feel like she's already great at everything. So the sky's the limit for her and I'm excited.

Q. I feel like every time I open my phone I'm seeing you on a new campaign. I even got a PR Box with you on it with CeraVe. Can you talk about the impact NIL has had on your life what you think it's doing for the landscape of college sports?

PAIGE BUECKERS: It's an extremely big blessing to be able to capitalize off that now in college and build your wealth, build your portfolio, build your resumé, build relationships and partnerships and who you work with.

A huge part for me, and I know the entire team, is giving back. That's a huge part. Making sure every person you partner with has the same values, they align and you have the same goals at the forefront. And like the visibility, you see a lot of women's college sports stars, women's sports

stars in general on TV, in commercials, doing campaigns, things like that. So for the visibility it's really cool and really amazing to see and we've come a long way. And I only think the future is even brighter.

Q. I know we've been asking you about the last, the last few days you'll be coached by Coach. I'm curious, what do you think you'll miss most about him, one thing sarcastic, one thing more sentimental?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah. I mean, obviously his sarcasm and his quick-witted humor and his ability to let you know that he doesn't like you and he hates coaching you and you're the worst thing that ever happened, but then on the other side of it, how much he has your back and how much -- he's a little bit delusional and exaggeration-pro. You know all these things he's saying, he doesn't really mean it. But his belief and his confidence and his trust in me in how much he holds me accountable for all the things that you didn't even know was important, I think nobody has a better feel on that and nobody has better knowledge and experience in that.

Him winning 11 national titles wasn't on accident. You know this guy is a winner. You know everything he says is pretty much gold. Just his experience, his wisdom and his sarcasm, I guess.

Q. Geno at different points has called you annoying, DT annoying, Sarah Strong annoying. I'm curious if you think perhaps he's annoying and maybe he's attracting people who are similar to him?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I guess maybe it's like all his favorite players he calls annoying. But he's definitely annoying himself. So I'm sure he recruits like-minded people like him. I guess it's a trend that he set.

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