

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

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Amalie Arena

UConn Huskies Coach Geno Auriemma

Finals Pregame Media Conference

Q. The last time you were in this national championship game was sort of the ending of a very interesting season with the adversity and health and all the other stuff. You had lost Dorka in the Elite Eight that year. And then you wake up to find out on that Sunday morning that players on your team weren't feeling well. Can you just recall what you felt, thought what's next, what was going on? And, you know, do the players that played that day, did they learn anything from that that will help them tomorrow?

GENO AURIEMMA: That would be only Paige, if I remember correctly, that's left from that team. Azzi played like two minutes, three minutes, and was vomiting all morning. Paige is the only player here that actually played in that game.

I remember going out to the game, talking to our coaches before we went into the locker room, I said, one of two things is going to happen tonight. We're either going to win a close game maybe in double overtime, something like that, because South Carolina doesn't play great, or we're going to get blown out. This is not going to be one of those, you know, we lost by 10.

And I was right. Five minutes into the game, we got blown out. Yeah, you have to show up with enough players that at least you have a chance. But just showing up isn't going to get it done for you, you know?

I think you have to come to this particular game feeling like you have all your bases covered. And then at the same time you have to play exceptionally well. Nobody's going to lose the game tomorrow night. Somebody has to go out and win it. And that's really, really difficult to do, to beat a really, really good team.

As I've been saying this whole tournament, we have a very



difficult task tomorrow night. And so do they. That's the way it's supposed to be on championship night.

Q. When you look at what South Carolina has done, they've reached their fifth consecutive Final Four. There's a handful of programs -- you, Stanford has done it. You've had an opportunity to have an elite top-level rivalry with Pat Summitt and Tennessee and now South Carolina in Dawn. I'm wondering what you took from the rivalry with Tennessee and in what ways you feel it's informed the way you think about that? Do you take a step back? Do you think about it as something larger for the game? What your perspective is on it.

GENO AURIEMMA: Probably not. I think I used up all my big-picture crap with Tennessee and UConn, Geno and Pat. That got old awfully fast. I thought I was over it until it became UConn-Notre Dame. We played -- how many times in three years? We played 15 times in four years.

We're in the same league. We play twice, conference championship, NCAA Tournament. We go both teams undefeated in the national championship game. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Then Muffet loses her mind about some crap. I don't know what she was talking about. So then it became, I just want to go coach my team and see what happens.

Then the rivalry, supposedly wasn't a rivalry at the time, we play South Carolina because I have a lot of respect for Dawn. We start playing. The first five years we played, every game was a blowout for us.

Then all of a sudden, you know, things changed like you knew they would. They're not going to stay like that forever.

So the more things changed, the more they stay the same. Now here we are. It's almost like a recreation of those two things going on where two teams are somewhat sort of constantly in each other's way, although we haven't been able to provide the kind of -- yeah, we beat them Paige's freshman year -- but we haven't been able to provide the kind of punch-back until this year that I hoped that that

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rivalry demands and needs.

Going forward, if it stays like this, I'm not going to be here for that long, but if it stays like this for the next five, six, seven years, like the other two did, then that's not a good thing for women's basketball. That's not a good thing for women's basketball.

I hope one of us is here every year. It's like anything. Like in the Super Bowl. You really don't want two teams that no one's ever heard of and you don't want two 5 seeds playing for the national championship. Everybody loves the favorite and everybody loves the villain. A lot of times over the years I've provided both.

Q. Along those lines, you've had a difficult last few years since COVID hit personally and with this team. Does the run you guys have made this year and the success you've had, the health of everybody re-invigorate you a little bit more? You said you won't be here in five, six, seven years, maybe here a little longer knowing this team is healthy. You have Sarah, a really good freshman, you might want to stick around a little longer because you've re-invigorated?

GENO AURIEMMA: I would say since Paige's freshman year, maybe even a year before that, I've quit five times every year. I'll go to practice and on my way home, I go, that's it. I'm not going to go to practice tomorrow. I'm calling in sick for life. I'm out.

And they go, you can't do that. You have to have a victory tour and go around and get rocking chairs from every team in the league. I say, no, I'm out.

And then come to practice the next day and things will get better. Then three weeks later I quit again.

And then the NCAA Tournament comes and, I go, that's it, I'm done. Then this year, this happens every year. Somehow, some way we get here -- except for one year, which Paige didn't play in.

And then on the way here, I go, man, I could do this for another four, five years. So, yeah, this ruins my life coming here every year.

So how many more times can we do it? I don't know. I don't know. But runs like this make you still feel relevant, you still have an impact. Kids still respond. Our coaching staff is really, really good at what they do. And I'm fortunate enough to coach great kids who want to win for each other. There's not a lot of drama on our team with all that NIL nonsense and guys that are halfway in the portal, halfway out during the season.

I'm really, really fortunate of what I have. Because it stays like that, it's very difficult to walk away from something like this. Very difficult.

Q. How would you describe what Paige has meant to UConn? And just knowing the special relationship that you have with her, how much do you want to see her go out as a champion?

GENO AURIEMMA: Again, if you're in this for the first time, you really don't have the appreciation for what it really is. If you're fortunate like I've been, you know what that feels like when someone who has given their whole heart and soul to your program walks off the court in the last game of their career with a national championship, because I've been there. I started with Rebecca and Pam Weber walking off as seniors winning a national championship. You see the effect that it has on their life.

Paige doesn't need anything to change her life to make her life better. She's got a life that most people would dream about. But for someone who's invested so much into the University of Connecticut, the community, the team, her teammates, and loves the game so much, she deserves to go out as a national champion. But so do a bunch of kids at South Carolina that have done the exact same thing.

And that's the beauty of it. Only one of those is going to get to be able to do that. And what I want for Paige is the same thing that Dawn wants for her kids.

So that's why whoever doesn't get the opportunity to do that, it stings, it hurts. It's going to take a long time to get over that, but at the same time, it's not going to be your defining moment.

Q. You said last night that you didn't think they had made any mistakes, that you were humbled by how they had played. Do you ever remember saying that after a game? And have you discovered any mistakes in the last 12 hours?

GENO AURIEMMA: No, I never said that before I don't think of any of the teams I've brought here. And I brought some great teams. But this team you have to lie to them once in a while. (Chuckles).

You can't tell them the truth all the time because they start to get down. Oh, my God, Coach doesn't like us. So every once in a while you've got to tell them they're perfect and fantastic and all that good stuff. Then you've got to text them after, make sure, are you still fantastic after I said you're fantastic? That kind of stuff.

But last night I was pretty close to being right that the goals that we set for ourselves, this is what we're going to do, they completely bought into that, completely did it in a way that I would say, how could we do that better. And I don't know that we could.

Every decision that we wanted them to make, they came as close to getting that many right as they possibly could. Our big guys, our post players, here's how we want you to try to guard their post players. And they came about as close as you can possibly come to doing that.

Our guards, here's how we want you to guard the perimeter players. Here's what we want to do offensively. These are the shots we want to get.

And a lot of times, the first time we played UCLA last year, we had the same goals and we accomplished none of them. That's why a game like last night, on the biggest stage, in their biggest moment, for them to come up that close to that, yeah, that was pretty special.

Q. I know being with UConn people never feel sorry for UConn, but if you go back the last several years, with Morgan William' shot and Arike's shot and the moving screen last year, you've had heartbreaking moments in the Final Four. For you personally, even though you've won 11, does some of the heartbreak over the last nine years make the chance even more special to you because you've had those frustrations?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, but I've got to tell you something. I don't look at those two years, the Mississippi State game, the Notre Dame game, I don't look at those two as heartbreaking frustrations.

Now, I would have if I didn't make two decisions in both of those games that I think have more to do with us losing than those two buzzer-beaters. So that's the frustration that I take away from that. Why do you keep screwing it up for these guys?

And people are shocked I've lost more Final Fours for my team than they have because coaches make decisions about what to do with their team. And if you make the right decision, you win. But how do you know if you make the right decision is if you win?

I think those two shots were the result of -- you made two bad decisions and they capitalized on it. So nothing's bothering me since those two games, except that we can't show up here with a full team. That's bothered me more than anything else.

So the fact that we're here now and we sort of kind of have

a chance to be able to manipulate the game a little bit better than we had before, that's rewarding. That makes up for all the heartache and all the trauma and tribulations that we have had to go through since those two guys graduated.

Q. Sarah mentioned a few minutes ago she was a little surprised how smooth her transition to college basketball was. I'm curious --

GENO AURIEMMA: I'm surprised she actually said that much. (Laughter).

Q. When was the first few moments you thought she might be capable of for you guys as a true freshman?

GENO AURIEMMA: Probably when I saw her in high school. I saw her do things that I hadn't seen any kid that age do in a long, long, long time. I thought to myself -- and Jamelle was instrumental in it -- I said if this can transfer, even half of it, to when she's at UConn, we've got something pretty special.

I didn't know that it would happen that fast. I thought it would take some time. But it clicked right from the very beginning.

So there was no doubt in my mind that we enter the NCAA Tournament and I'm worried about, man, I hope she doesn't act like a freshman. She hasn't acted like a freshman, she hasn't acted her age since I saw her in ninth and 10th grade. I'm not surprised.

But before I leave here I do have to say this and not just because it's women's basketball, but I've been to these Final Fours for 24 years. This is the most women I've seen at a press conference since I started this 40 years ago, and I'm just really, really proud of you all. Really.

Q. How is this team different from your previous championship teams?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, they're all different from each other. I think we have less experience throughout the lineup than some of the other ones. Jana playing in her first college season. Sarah playing in her first college season. KK and Ash are in their second year. Kaitlyn Chen, this is the first time being on the stage. At Princeton she got to do a lot, but never to this point.

I guess it's different that there's so many young players. We have had teams that were young but they also -- significant older players. Paige is the only upperclassmen that's been through this for four years.

So it's different that we rely so much on our outside, our perimeter game, and not as much on our interior game.

A lot of the teams we've come here with that have won championships were more well-balanced, I think. We had the ability -- we've come here with Rebecca and Kara, we're going to score. We've come here with Stefanie Dolson and Tina Charles and Stewy, we're going to score. And I don't know that we have that right now. So it's different. It's much different in that respect.

Q. We're entering an era where it's never been more important how much revenue a given sport can generate, the rev-share era. What more do you think can be done to maximize revenues for women's basketball, and in particular, from this tournament?

GENO AURIEMMA: Charge more like everybody else does for everything. Is that fair? No. But that's one way to do it. To maybe re-evaluate how we sell our product to the media. What are we really worth? Let's go find out.

Can we stand alone? For years and years we've been packaged with all the other Olympic sports, so to speak, in one big chunk. So can we completely separate ourselves and say what are we worth to you?

And it may not be to the exact people that are doing the games right now. It might be somebody else because there's so many more choices. There's people here representing outlets that didn't exist 10 years ago. We need to explore all that. We need to be able to think outside the box.

Again, I keep saying this -- I don't want to come across as somebody who is ungrateful or all that because I've benefited so much -- and people know me. Those that don't I don't give a damn because they'll never understand what I'm talking about anyway -- but I do think that sometimes we are being held hostage by tradition.

This is the way we've always done it. It's easy. It's simple. It's uncomplicated. But why? Why not go out there and look at what other people are doing and take their best practices. Because it can make us money and it can put us at a higher profile.

We certainly have the players that can handle that profile and there's going to be more of them coming along. We don't want to shortchange them. We don't want to sell them short, you know?

So I do know one way that they should lose money, and that's to make the experience even better for the players than it is right now. So you shouldn't be trying to make

more money by shortchanging their experience. I don't think there's anybody on the guys' side and the committee is going, I think we can save a couple dollars if we do this. I don't think they worry about that.

And sometimes you've got to spend a lot of money to make way more money. But at the end of the day, what are we doing for the players that makes their experience the best ever, because the best ever experience you make for them -- if you spoil the players off the court, they're going to spoil you on the court. That's how we treat our program.

If you spoil us on the court, we will spoil you off the court. Let's work together on that.

Q. You've known Dawn Staley as a player, as a coach, USA Basketball, kind of just seeing her emergence to the top of the sport. Can you just talk about her character, who she is as a person, but also how your relationship with her has evolved over time?

GENO AURIEMMA: It's quite different, obviously, than my journey. Growing up, she played at a real high level at UVA. I coached at UVA. So we have that in common.

She was a multi, gold medal-winning Olympic player. I coached those guys at the Olympics. So we have that in common.

And I think that she started off her career having to prove that she could coach at the college level at a time when it wasn't easy to do that and at a school like Temple where it wasn't easy to do that. All through it all, she's accomplished things that are very, very hard.

So to be where she is right now and to have done it in the way that she's done it, I have a lot of respect for her. I have tremendous respect for her knowing how she grew up and how hard she fought to get to where she is today.

She was on my staff at the Olympics. So we got to spend a little bit of time together there.

And you don't get here by accident. You get here by being committed and true to who you are. And she doesn't try to be anything she's not. She's all in on who she is and what she wants to do. That's why they keep coming back here.

Q. It wasn't that long ago you guys lost to Tennessee. That's really a big turning point in your season. What do you feel like it took, or how did the team get from that game that experience to being able to peak at the right time? I know that's the goal every year at UConn, but for this particular team, how did you get them to get to this spot?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think that Tennessee game, in a different way than the USC game or the Notre Dame game earlier in the year -- I think that USC game exposed things in our team that only playing in that environment and being exposed is going to effect some changes -- no matter how you see it in practice, no matter how much you show it to them in practice, until they feel the sting of that in a big game in that moment.

So there were things that we really broke down on. We broke down defensively. We broke down offensively in a lot of ways. Some of our players that we were really, really counting on really struggled, probably more mentally than physically.

And we came out of that game and took all those things and went home. And the team was really, really ready and receptive to these are the changes that have to be made. We have to be better defensively at these areas. We have to execute better offensively in these areas. We have to be tougher in these areas.

So you play games like that because you want to find those things out, and that was a huge, huge benefit for us.

And we have players that want to get better every day, and that was the impetus that we needed that particular game.

Q. You said you quit five times a year then you go to practice the next day and you decide not to quit. What is it that you can't quit? Is there a consistent moment or experience in those practices that keeps drawing you back?

GENO AURIEMMA: When you get to be 40 years at one place and my age, there are a lot of people on my payroll. I probably have more people in my world collecting checks from my house than come from the federal government, which you might not be getting any of those anymore either, so I don't know.

I think there's a lot of people counting on me to keep doing what I'm doing at UConn -- all my team, all my staff. I think they're counting on me to keep going and keep impacting and keep doing what we do.

My staff are relentless recruiters and they're relentless in individual workouts with our players. So they're committed to, what are we doing now, what are we doing next week? What are we doing next year? What are we doing for the future? With no intention of going, what if he's not here? No, they expect me to be here.

It's always been really, really hard for me to -- since I was a

kid, to turn and not say no. Saying no is very, very difficult for me. No, I'm done. No, I'm not going to do that.

And the minute my players don't respond, the minute I can't get my team to respond in the way I want them to respond, then I'll know that's the time to walk away. Right now, I'm still getting the response that makes me feel like I'm relevant. When I stop becoming relevant, it's time to go.

Maybe because the kids change all the time. Like, if it was your kids -- let's say I had to coach them for 18 years like you do with your kids, oh, I would have been out long ago. Luckily I only have to do it for four years. Just when I get tired of them, they get tired of me, bye, congratulations, happy trails.

Q. With Kaitlyn coming in to play for you after playing for Carla are there things you noticed this season that remind you of Carla or show that she's been coached by Carla?

GENO AURIEMMA: She's definitely a product of a program that values the same things that we value and coaches and teaches the same things that we teach -- maybe in a different way, but still it's the same. It's the same.

She's not afraid to use her voice. She walks into a situation that any kid would be intimidated by. I'm walking into UConn and I've got Paige Bueckers over here and Azzi Fudd over here and I've got this guy here. And now I'm going to walk in and I'm going to go, okay, give me the ball, I'm in charge. That takes a lot of guts to be able to do that.

One thing that I know the Princeton players, they're tough and they're full of guts because they have to be to get to where they want to go.

She was the go-to player on that team and was okay coming here and taking a smaller role. And yet the other day, when it was time for a big role against USC, she stood up and embraced it.

And I'm not surprised by any of that. That's who she is. And actually, to be honest with you, that's who Carla was as a player. Although, Kaitlyn is way more vocal than Carla was when Carla was a player.

But I've trusted Kaitlyn Chen since the minute she walked on campus.

Q. You talked about players changing over the last however many years, but how have you, since the last



national championship, how have you changed as a coach, whether that's adapting to players, adapting to college women's basketball? How have you changed as a coach?

GENO AURIEMMA: Hopefully a little. Hopefully not a lot. I do think that -- I heard a great line -- I don't know if you ever saw the show or read the book, "A Gentlemen in Moscow." It's one of the best books I've ever read. And there was a line in that by Count Rostov when he said, "Times change and it's the duty of gentlemen to change with them."

So, yeah, I've tried to change with the times but I've not given up what I believe in and how I think things should be done and what my standards are and what my beliefs are in terms of how to get to those standards. That hasn't changed. And what kind of kid I want.

So, yeah, I've had to adapt to all the things that have changed in all the world of college sports, college basketball, in particular.

But I've also forced the players that come to Connecticut to adapt to me and not think that they're going to go to college and stay the same and have me adapt to them more than I wanted them to adapt to me.

And it's the way I always talk to them. You came here because we have something you desperately want. So you have to adapt to what we do in order to get that. And then we will accommodate you as you're adapting to a point. And we work together.

I make them change. They help me change -- a little bit.

Q. The one thing that stands out about this team is their heart. A part of that is your better half, Ms. Kathy. I want to know, how has her heart and her influence really helped the girls this season and especially for some of the young players?

GENO AURIEMMA: It's been like that from the very beginning. There were times when players would show up at my house and I'll be, like, what are you doing here. They came to have dinner with Kathy. I would just leave, I would go find something to do.

Anytime I'm home, anytime I'm losing it over something that's happening with some of the players, she's the first one to take their side of it and make it less personal. Like, why are you thinking that or feeling like that? You need to put yourself in their shoes more and see what are they feeling, what are they thinking -- always make me look at it from their point of view.

And always, road trips, after games, she's their biggest cheerleader. She's the one in the locker room whenever to celebrate.

I don't think any coach or anyone in the world that's trying to accomplish something that's really, really difficult and where it takes you away from your family a lot can possibly do it without someone that understands and is embracing it and is willing to be a willing partner in all that.

So her relationship with all my players, all my teams is pretty special.

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