

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

Sunday, April 6, 2025

Tampa Bay, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

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

Finals Postgame Media Conference

UConn - 82, South Carolina - 59

GENO AURIEMMA: You don't prepare speeches for something like this. Although, today I was thinking, man, what am I going to say if things don't go our way. How can you describe the emotions that you would feel if it went the wrong way for us when there's so much riding on this game for a lot of people, a lot of people at UConn and mostly for Paige being her last opportunity to do this?

So I just kept thinking something good has to happen because if we were going to lose it would have been before now. I don't think the basketball gods would take us all the way to the end -- they've been really cruel with some of the kids on this team. They've suffered a lot of the things that could go wrong in their college careers as an athlete. So they don't need anymore heartbreak. So they weren't going to take us here and give us more heartbreak. I kept holding on to that.

I'm glad they were rewarded. This is one of the most emotional Final Fours and emotional national championships I've been a part of since that very first one.

**Q. Paige, walk us through the journey you've had the last five years -- freshman in the bubble and now finishing off with a national championship.**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, it's been a story of resilience, of gratitude, of adversity, of overcoming adversity, just responding to life's challenges and trying to fuel them to make me a better person, a better player, and continue to



grow in my leadership abilities and being a great teammate and just staying who I am, standing firm in who I am and believing in what we do here as individuals, what we do here as a team.

And just an overwhelming sense of gratitude for everything that's happened through the ups and downs, I wouldn't trade it for the world.

To be shaped, to be the person that I am today and the team we are today and obviously you feel like on the other side of a really hard time is a really big blessing. And we stuck to it and kept the faith.

And to be rewarded with something like this, you can't really even put it into words.

**Q. How validating is it that, Paige, you're ending your career with the national championship; Azzi, you came back from a knee injury; and, Sarah, as a freshman to come in to be part of breaking this title drought, just how validating is it to sit up there knowing you're national champions?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Very validating to all the hard work we put in as individuals and as a team and how much we stuck together through the good times and the bad and how connected we were. We feel like we were so connected and nothing could break us.

We've been through a lot on our own, as a team. So we feel like nothing that life or basketball can throw at us would ever break us and make us separate.

So to be able to sit up here with them, with the whole team and share this moment is extremely validating.

**Q. Paige and Azzi, you've seen a lot in your careers. You've seen women's basketball change a lot. If you could say something about what the changes have been from the perspective of players, and also how you see yourself in the context of all the generations of women who have come before?**

AZZI FUDD: I felt like last year, being out, I really got a

**ASAP** sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

chance to sit back and look around and just see the attention that we had and just the impact that all of us, my teammates, had on little girls. It was just incredible.

To be a part of that this year and still just to see our fans that were in Tampa and it feels like a home game, to have that support and just to see like little girls with their hair braided like us, little girls with shirts on and even grown men, it's incredible.

To have that support and to see that grow, I feel like it was there my freshman year, but I feel it's definitely grown a lot since then. So to see that, it's amazing.

PAIGE BUECKERS: I would say a lot of the same things. Just in terms of the visibility and the access to women's sports now, women's basketball, it's been amazing to be a part of even since my freshman year.

The women's game has grown so much and you're extremely grateful to be a part of that. I feel like it's only going to get better towards the future.

But we thank the people who have laid the foundation every single day, the women basketball players who came before us who allow us to be at this stage, allow the WNBA to be something we aspire to be and fulfill those shoes. It all started with the groundwork, and we're just trying to fulfill what they've done.

**Q. Can you just tell us when the moment came, it looked like you were going to win the game much earlier before the buzzer came, but when the final moment came, when the buzzer is there, when you have the realization, what was going through your heart and mind?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: So many emotions. Gratitude was the main one -- of the journey, of the ups and downs, everything that it took to get to that point. And just overwhelming joy and just so happy for every single person who was a part of this journey. Just to be able to sum it up in a few words, joy and gratitude would be the forefront.

**Q. Azzi, scoring 11 points in the third quarter, in the quarter that essentially put this game away. Could you take me through what you felt emotionally at those times when you're seeing the ball go through the hoop? And also you and Paige have obviously been through so many ups and downs here at this program. I know you came here to do this. What was going through your mind and what goes through your mind now knowing that you helped Paige to get her national championship that she wanted?**

AZZI FUDD: I think going into the third quarter, we knew we had a good lead. We played a great first half. We wanted to continue that. We didn't want to let them back in the game.

I think all of our mindset was just to be aggressive, stay locked in, stay disciplined, stay together. And that's exactly what we did. I happened to score 11 points, but I was doing what my teammates, what the game was giving and how my teammates got me the ball.

Then being able to do it with this group is so incredible. I mean, there's a lot that -- just this season, the ups and downs of the season, but the past four years, this group has been through so much adversity together.

To be able to do this for our seniors, I really don't have words to describe what this feels like, what it means to me, but I'm super grateful and I'm super proud of this entire team.

**Q. Sarah, you set the record for the most points scored by a freshman in an NCAA Tournament, breaking the record by Tamika Catchings, which she set back in 1998 when your mom was playing. I'm wondering if you could talk about this entire tournament for you and how well you've played?**

SARAH STRONG: I feel like I did better than I was expecting. It's cool to score that. That wouldn't have happened without my teammates, though.

**Q. Paige, when you came out of the game, you were subbed out in that final minute and you had a long embrace with Geno. What was going through your head, especially as you went down the bench, whatever you're willing to share about that moment specifically?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, just gratitude for all that Coach has meant to me and how much he's shaped me to the human I am, to the basketball player I am throughout this entire five years. And just putting it all together in one hug what our journey has been together.

He told me he loved me. And I told him I hated him, so... (Laughter). But we both love each other even though we hate each other some days.

But just every single relationship that I've built throughout the years here, you just try to encapsulate it in one hug for 5 seconds.

But just every single person that I went down the line and hugged just meant so much to me and meant so much to

the team. Just like I've been saying, a state of gratitude.

**Q. Sarah, there's been a lot of talk about journeys. Everybody is talking about the journey. Yours is kind of short so far. But how does it feel? A lot of players spend their entire careers and never win a national championship. Just your perspective about your first year winning a national championship and some of your thoughts and what's your perspective is on that?**

SARAH STRONG: Yeah, we've gone to practice every day working hard for this moment. Just really proud of the team and the way we've been playing.

**Q. Is it something you expected?**

SARAH STRONG: I mean, no, not really.

**Q. Paige, you have talked throughout your career about how much the team means to you and that that's the most important thing to you. How fitting is it then that this was truly a team effort and it wasn't -- obviously Sarah and Azzi had great games -- but this was not one player taking over and winning this title on their own?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, we talked about it as a team. We thought leading up to this weekend, the Final Four game, last game and this game, that we hadn't played our best team basketball yet in the tournament. And we had gotten to the point where we were and done it pretty well.

But we thought we were saving our best performances for this weekend. And it's been just, I think, a great summary of what we have been this entire season of being a team, staying connected, on any given night it can be anybody's night.

And how we play as a team, and I think that was just a great showing for that between last game and this game. So it's extremely fitting.

It's destiny and obviously I have a great faith, so I believe God planned it perfectly in the way that it went out. And it's a great last showing of the great team basketball that we've been playing all season.

**Q. How many unread texts and missed calls do you have right now? And who are the first people you're going to call back and why?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Actually, I love responding to texts. So I probably only had 10 missed texts before this game. I've not checked my phone yet. Hoping it's in the hundreds, maybe somebody wants to reach out to me, say

congrats.

Missed calls, I don't like talking on the phone. So I'll get back to people on text.

If I had to pick one person to get back to -- I don't know. It depends who reached out to me.

**Q. Sarah, can you just talk about how much Geno means to you and his leadership, especially now being a national champion in your freshman year?**

SARAH STRONG: I would say he means a lot to me. I feel he means a lot to everyone on the team. He's a great coach, so I really look up to him.

What else do you want me to say? (Laughter).

**Q. Azzi, you just look like you were playing really free today. You had a smile on your face the entire game. You were locked in from the beginning, I could tell that. But you had a smile on your face the entire game. What was allowing you to play so freely today?**

AZZI FUDD: Well, first, I think my faith. I feel Paige and other people on the team have been really inspirational in that respect. So being able to let go, give it to God, definitely takes that pressure that I put on myself away.

And also I play my best when I'm having fun. I knew this is our last game regardless of what happens. So I'm going to have fun with everyone but specifically our upperclassmen. Kaitlyn is always talking about last one, last one.

So just to have fun with all of them, it's exactly what I wanted. Shots will fall. Shots won't fall. But I knew I was going to give it my all, leave everything on the floor for that 40 minutes. So everything I could control I knew I was going to do the best I could. So I was just trying to have fun with it.

**Q. Azzi, just given everything that you've been through -- when you think about especially the last year -- what does it mean to you to have this kind of a game on the biggest stage?**

AZZI FUDD: I mean, I really don't have words to describe what today felt like and what the rest of the day is going to feel like. Today was an amazing accomplishment, to do it with this team.

But, yeah, I scored a lot of points but I just did what my teammates -- they sent me great screens, got me the ball. I didn't get outside of myself. I read what the game was giving me.

It could have been Sarah or Paige scoring the most. So I just did what I knew I was capable of. My teammates trusted me. Shout-out to them for putting me in that position and believing in me.

**Q. Paige, yesterday I asked you how you don't get comfortable going into this game being that you beat South Carolina by 29 points last game. Finishing this game you beat them by 23 points. Coming into this game, did it feel like you had to prove a point being that you beat them by 29 points?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: No, I think we didn't carry whatever it was that happened last game when we played them the last time. And we actually probably knew they were going to come out with a chip on their shoulder and be even more aggressive in trying to set the tone from the jump and strike first.

So we were both playing for a national championship. I think that's the only motivation that you needed on both sides. So we just try to come out and play every possession that it's the most important possession of the season, serve the moment, and not get too caught up in the past, the future, but being present in the moment and just serving that.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

**Q. Can you talk about the journey that Paige has been on these last five years with you and the journey you guys have had over the last nine years to get back to winning a national championship, with all the heartbreaks you talked about the other day, how you said you made mistakes that cost the team, and just what it means to get back on top?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Being honest, I think there was a big part of my inner circle of people that I trust that were hoping that after the Stewy fourth in a row that I should have called it a day back then. That would have been apropos, I guess -- ride off into the sunset with Stewy and Tuck and Moriah and those guys.

But when you make the decision you're not finished yet, and then three, four years go by and people start telling you that UConn is not UConn anymore and it's somebody else's turn. And then five years go by and six years go by and seven years go by -- it's not like it was extra motivation, but it just happened to coincide, the last five years, with the pandemic, the bubble, the injuries.

And I just kept thinking, you know, I kind of owe it to these people to kind of let me see if we can take a whole team,

what could happen, because these people that have been playing against us for the last seven, eight years have not played a University of Connecticut team, yet beating UConn always seemed like the national championship to them. For us it always seemed like, if we ever got a chance to get healthy, this could be pretty good.

So it coincided with Paige's journey. So my journey became hers in so many words. Who's to say after she won her first -- if we won her sophomore year, her second year at Connecticut, we won the national championship, I feel, okay, I lived up to my promise; she got a national championship? But because it didn't happen, it was just almost like a crusade on our coaching staff's part to let's do this, let's do this, let's do this.

Who knew it would turn out like this? But I started to trust in them. And when I tell you it's really out of your hands, it really is true. All of this is in the hands of the players who are playing. And they made it all worthwhile today.

It's probably the most emotional one, like I said, that I've had maybe since -- I don't know, really, really emotional, 2000 -- I can name -- '95 was pretty emotional, obviously. 2000 in Philly, in front of my mom and stuff. And in 2002 with Sue and that crew; and now. Then D's senior year and Stewy's senior year. Those were probably the most, because of what was involved. And this one had as much if not more involved. I was pretty emotional when the game ended.

**Q. We heard Paige say what you guys said to each other, but I'm wondering what you told her. And also, too, just the fact that she has prioritized the team so much, how fitting was it that everything was not on her today?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Back part of your question, we as coaches felt like Azzi was the key to the tournament, that every game that Azzi played -- we talked about it in the locker room before the game, just the coaching staff -- we said every time Azzi scores more than 16 points -- I forget what the number was exactly -- we win every one of those games.

We felt if she could have an Azzi-type game, didn't have to be a 28-point game like the one in Carolina, that we would win. We kind of know what we're going to get from Paige. We kind of know what we're going to get from Sarah.

So Azzi became the focal point for us of who has to step up tonight. And she did magnificently, obviously.

And to your point about the Paige thing, there are times when she and I are very, very serious together. And a lot

of serious conversations have been had over the last five years between the two of us.

Some conversations are light and fun and don't mean anything. But today was the first one, I think, in five years that all the emotions that have been building inside of me came out. And they came out in here because in five years that she's been at Connecticut I've never seen her cry. And she might deny it, but she cried because she's going to miss me. (Laughter).

**Q. In November, you told me that you wanted to win another one to prove that UConn was still making history. This team, in the legacy of UConn women's basketball, how do they fit into that, in your mind?**

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't know. Usually those things are decided by other people who write what it means. I do think that each championship is a building block, and the legacy is all those blocks placed on top of each other.

And I don't know that one -- well the bottom one holds everything up, but the first one -- I don't think any other one means more to the legacy.

Maybe what this one means is that there were a lot of people that didn't think it would ever happen. There were a lot of people that hoped it would never happen. I'm glad that we were able to get to that spot that Connecticut has occupied -- not that we had to win a championship, but in the last 30 years I don't know that any program's meant more to their sport than what UConn has meant to women's basketball, so I feel good about that.

**Q. I know you've spoken extensively about your and Paige's relationship over the past couple of weeks, I guess. But just you mentioning that you feel like you really want to do it for her and do it for all your players, what about her inspires you and your coaching staff?**

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, it's funny. Jamelle wasn't here the freshman year, Tonya was not here the freshman year. They missed the whole bubble and missed her being the national player of the year and all that.

So their journey, my staff's journey with Paige has been more like that (motioning up and down) because Paige is infuriating, and she's absolutely mesmerizing when you watch her play at practice. She's like a symphony conductor that just, everything just flows the way she wants it to flow. She dictates the pace of everything we do at practice, dominates every practice.

But when she goes and goes into those places where she doesn't necessarily have in her mind what we want as a

coaching staff, she's infuriating. And it happened a couple times today. And it just is really infuriating.

She is going to want to dictate, and my relationship with her has been, I know what she's going to do and it's not always what I want her to do. But I know in the end she's always doing what she thinks she needs to do for us to win.

And so I gotta pretend -- I've gotta not look and if I do accidentally look, I've got to pretend I didn't see it, and the two of us live happily ever half.

**Q. As a fellow senior citizen I ask this, I hope you're not offended by it, but you are the oldest coach in men or women's basketball to win a national championship. You've talked about how the last few years it's been hard. There have been times you thought, hey, do I want to keep doing this? Can you just talk about your journey to stick with this? And do you want to stick around another several years to win a few more?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, all those other coaches had the good sense to not stick around until they were 71. Again, we maybe talked about this recently, yes, we all feel our age at some point. We don't like to admit that we're older because we still act younger because of the people that we're dealing with.

I know a lot of my friends that are my age that haven't done what I've done with who I've done it with, and they look way older, act way older because they've lost the ability to be a kid because they're not around kids.

So, yeah, I may be 71 number-wise, but I think otherwise I'm more able to do stuff with those young people because I'm around them every day and they rub off on me.

Does that mean I can do this for another X number of years? No, because, you know, wine is good for you, too, and if you're around it all the time, after a while, you wake up and you go that was really bad, I had too much fun.

So these kids are fun. But there is going to come a time when the fun doesn't eliminate how hard it is to do this job. This job is really hard to do.

I almost equated this one with coaching the Olympic team. Okay? If you know anything about coaching the Olympic team, it's a four-year cycle.

You've got to win a world championship first. And then you've got to win a gold medal. And it takes four years for that whole thing to evolve.

And if I were to tell you the number of people who work every day, not just in Colorado Springs, to win a gold medal, that you feel like if you don't win it they have to wait four more years to have that opportunity.

The incredible amount of pressure and obligation that you have -- and my job has become that at UConn, that it's more of an obligation to do what they expect me to do as opposed to any fame and fortune that's going to come my way. Although my AD doesn't know that yet.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

