

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Indiana vs UConn

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Bridgeport, Connecticut, USA

Total Mortgage Arena

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Dorka Juhasz

Olivia Nelson-Ododa

Christyn Williams

Sweet 16 Media Conference

GENO AURIEMMA: Thoughts on the regionals are always the same every year. First you're thrilled to still be playing when you realize how it could have easily gone the other way, how fortunate you are to still be playing.

You get to a point, especially in women's basketball, that when you get to this time of the year, every team that's left is a really, really, really good team that probably has a chance to win a National Championship. If you get to this level, you've proven that you can win at the highest level. We happen to be here with NC State, who's had a phenomenal year, and Notre Dame, who's playing their best basketball and is as talented as any team in the country, and an Indiana team that I think gets less respect than they deserve for what they've done and what they do and how they do it.

Teri probably likes it like that, I don't know. But all around the country you heard a lot of people talking about a lot of teams all throughout the season. But Indiana wasn't necessarily at the tip of anyone's tongue. Don't be shocked if -- I wouldn't be, if they win this whole thing.

Those are my thoughts. None of them are good.
(Laughter.)

Q. Did that game the other night against UCF, does it take a little bit longer to recover physically and mentally from a game like that, that kind of test?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah. Yeah, it does. Physically because it was such a grueling game. Emotionally it was



draining, and physically it was, as I said, grueling and draining.

If you're not careful, you start to think that -- this probably goes for both teams, them and us, you start to think that that's who you are. Oh, my God, is that who we are, five days before we're playing in the regionals? No, that game is the only game of the year that will ever be played like that. Until when? Well, if we play them next year it'll be exactly the same.

So you've kind of got to look at it as, hey, we were put in a situation that was really difficult. We put ourselves in some difficult situations, and we figured out a way to win that game making 14 field goals. We made our free throws down the stretch. We got stops when we had to get them.

So you come out of there and take away the good things that you're going to need going into this weekend.

Q. Why do you think this team might be particularly ready for a tournament setting amid how this regular season was for your group with all of these gritty wins that you all had to come together to create this year?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, the coaches on our staff and people in our program were really quick to mention -- when I was bitching and moaning for the next three days about how terrible we are and we're never going to win another game for the rest of history of UConn women's basketball because of the way we played, they were quick to remind me that, you know, two months ago we would have lost that game easily. Easily we would have lost that game. Probably by double digits.

So we've come a long way. We've improved in every area because of what we had to endure. Our young players had a chance to play a lot of minutes.

I think the kind of season that we had probably prepared us for Monday night's game, and it actually had something to do with us winning that game. Normally we're rolling in here having beaten everybody by 40 and we think we're invincible. Well, we certainly don't think that now. That's probably a good thing, because of the way it's played out

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all year long.

So I think we have a little more resolve than maybe we had two months ago.

Q. You guys being UConn, such a dominant power in the sport for so long, but this tournament has seen non-traditional teams getting further along. You sitting in the position of UConn, what does a tournament like this mean when you're seeing so many upsets, what does it mean for the sport as a whole?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, it's not the first time, but it happens so rarely that we're talking about it, right? I don't think we're quite to where the men are where 11 and 10 are playing against each other today, but we're way ahead of where we were 10 years ago in terms of, again, who has the opportunity to play in these games. It used to be limited, those opportunities, to only certain schools, certain programs. We were like college football for a long time, and maybe we're getting away from that as more players start to spread out all over the country, more schools get really committed to having a successful women's program.

So all these things have come together just like they did on the men's side. 15 years ago you could pretty much predict who three of the Final Four schools would be. So the fact that that happened -- and another big factor is how many teams lost at home. To me that's the biggest teller of anything, that a big deal is made out of who plays at home, who doesn't get to play at home, why should I have to play on their home court.

I think it just reminded everybody that it doesn't matter where you play. If you don't play well, you're going to get beat. That to me is the most striking sign that our game has changed so much, that that many road teams could win against such good teams.

Q. Following up on that, you talked about kind of players going to so many different non-traditional schools and Indiana being one of those on the women's basketball side. You've never played Indiana before in the history of either team's program. How have you seen Indiana rising to the point where it is now, hosting games as a 3 seed and coming here to the Sweet 16 for the second year in a row?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I think they've been really good since Teri got there, and just steadily getting better and better and better. Getting to the point where people now expect them to be at the level that they're at, because they've earned it. And the thing that's happened, and Indiana is a perfect example of this, I know which kind of kids supposedly the big-name schools recruit. I know what

kind of kids they're looking at when they go recruiting during the summer.

I think it's ironic how many of those kids that are recruited by all these schools got their ass beat this weekend or last weekend by kids that people thought, they're not good enough to play for us. And that is the sign that the game is growing, that there are going to have to be more kids that now you're going to have to go watch and go recruit. And the smart coaches have already figured that out, and Indiana -- the number one thing, I think, other than talent that they have, watching them on film, they are smart as hell, from the coaching staff down. They're smart as hell.

Q. Piggy-backing on that question, what's it like for you to face a team you've never faced before in the Sweet 16? You've been coaching forever --

GENO AURIEMMA: Forever?

Q. Close to forever?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, you figure when you've done this as long as I have, there's pretty much nobody that you haven't faced at least once. So yeah, this is a unique situation, for them and for us.

They don't know a lot about us. We don't know a lot about them. You can watch all the film you want, study as much as you want, but until you're actually on the floor with each other, you really don't get a feel for how a team plays, how they like to play. I think that helped us Monday night having played UCF so many times. Had we never seen that before, it might have been a different -- or if they had played somebody different, it would have been a different outcome.

Again, it goes into what I was saying earlier. You need to play well, regardless, because you have no idea what they're going to do, and they have no idea what we're going to do. But they have a couple really, really good players that they're counting on to play really well, and we have a couple really good players that have to play well for us.

Regardless of their style, our style, it might take a little bit of time to figure each other out, but I think it's going to be a great game myself.

Q. You talked about the crowds and the upsets and such. How far away do you think this women's game is from going to neutral sites like the men have right now for the first two rounds? Is it something that would help the game? Your crowd was great, Iowa's crowd was great, most of the crowds were great. Is it



worth it or is it better off to stay with having home court --

GENO AURIEMMA: How many other sports play on neutral courts? Men's basketball. That goes to show you that not just anybody can do it. Can it be done? I guess. We tried it. Should we go back and try it? Maybe. Although that was pretty good this last week. The crowds were pretty amazing.

Until the fan base grows around the country just for the game, not for your team -- because I think for the longest time the case has been that women's basketball fans are passionate about their team. And do we have enough basketball fans, women's basketball fans out there that are passionate about the game and that will go anywhere, anytime to see any game. That I can't answer.

But as I said, we've played in a lot of places. We've played in a lot of regionals in a lot of different places, so some places have been great, we've had amazing crowds; some places we've had not-so-great crowds, but maybe we ought to go back to it. Maybe we ought to try it, give it a shot and see what happens. What's the worst that could happen? You go back to home sites.

Q. You haven't had, let's say, an inordinate number of players from the Washington D.C. area come play for you out of the chute. What makes Azzi such a good fit?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, she would be a good fit pretty much anywhere. But when I watch a kid play, doesn't matter where they are, doesn't matter where they live, I'm looking for the same thing every other coach is looking for. You're looking for obviously a kid talented enough to play at this level, a kid that you think can help you win a National Championship, someone who's unselfish enough to know that, hey, I might be national Player of the Year as a sophomore but when I go to Connecticut, that's not that big a deal.

And you have to understand that, and she does. You have to be unselfish, which she is. You have to be able to play basketball and not just come in with a reputation as somebody who's supposed to be good, and she's a hell of a basketball player.

A lot of people probably don't know that because they've seen her shoot the ball, and that's become kind of like the thing. But if they watch her every day, they realize what a hell of a basketball player she is in almost every area. She's getting better defensively. She works at it like she does everything else.

So yeah, she's a perfect fit for us.

Q. How has she handled all the stuff that comes with being the highest-profile recruit playing for the highest-profile program?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, that I'm still waiting to see. I think it's going to take a year or so for all that to shake out. That whole NIL craziness that everybody thought, you know, you opened the floodgates and now every kid that signs a scholarship, with the scholarship comes a monthly check, hey, just for being you, here's this. And in reality it only affects a certain few players, and she's one of them.

But if the game means enough to you, if you love the game enough, you realize that the game is the reason why this is happening, and sometimes the brand is the reason why it's happening.

So you put her situation personally and our brand and those two things are a powerful combination, and from what I can see, she's handled it pretty well. It's a lot to handle for a young kid. People out there think it's, oh, yeah, wouldn't this be great, that every day she has to go do a photo shoot somewhere. Oh, yeah, it's just great. That's what you did when you were 18, right?

Q. On your freshmen, what does Azzi need to do from here on out to help you guys achieve your goals? Also in Caroline, I know she didn't play a ton on Monday. How do you think she can help you or what does she need to do to help you or get more time on the court?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, if Azzi plays exactly like she played the last three quarters of the other night, then she will have done everything she needs to do. You've seen in games where she just completely dominates the game, even for a freshman. So as long as she has the ability to do that, her being on the court automatically removes at least one defender from everybody else because you have to guard her the entire 40 minutes that she's out there. I very rarely take her out for that reason.

If she can do what she did Monday night -- not a lot of freshmen that the team is anxious to give the ball to with 10 seconds left to go make free throws, and not many freshmen that are anxious to go get it. Trust me, I've had both. I know which ones run away and which ones want the ball. The fact that that kid ran to the ball right away and we all knew enough to give it to her -- she's not going to play like a freshman. There will be times when she does, but I'm sure tomorrow there will be times where it dawns on her where she is, but she'll settle into what she does.

Caroline got hit pretty hard like three games in a row and missed some time, and it's taken her a little bit of time to get back into the swing of things.

Like I told her about the other night, Monday night was not a reflection on whether Caroline or Nika, for that matter, aren't going to be able to have a big role tomorrow and going forward if we're fortunate. But Caroline will have a big role tomorrow, and she's got to do what she does.

That's the thing about the NCAA Tournament. You can't all of a sudden reinvent yourself. You can't be less than you are, right? You can't be less than you've been all year, but you're not going to go out there tomorrow and be something you haven't been all year. We know what Caroline has done. She carried us for the longest time. She was second-team All-Big East as a freshman. She's going to have a hell of a game tomorrow. I told her that. Not that anybody listens to what I say anymore.

At least I can say I said it.

Q. Coach said the other night that the post players are going to have to play better this round than you did in the last game for you guys to advance. Can you just talk about the other night? Was it just physical play? Was it just an anomaly where you were both kind of off your games a little bit?

DORKA JUHASZ: I mean, yeah. I think personally, I could say obviously that was not my best game of the year. I think it was both physically, kind of mental, too. I think UCF was very aggressive, kind of made me a little rattled a little bit. But I think just moving forward, I think we're preparing. I think our guards need us a lot, the whole team needs us, so we're ready to play, and we're really excited.

OLIVIA NELSON-ODODA: Yeah, I think the biggest thing is just finding a rhythm, especially on the offensive end, especially on games that are super physical like Monday. And like Dorka said, the guards are going to need us a lot and will need our contribution, the entire team. So just finding that rhythm and settling in and being comfortable with it will be super important.

Q. Dorka, I know a lot has been said that UConn has not played Indiana, but of course you have. What can you tell your teammates about what they're going to see tomorrow?

DORKA JUHASZ: Yeah, I mean, it's exciting. I've done this the past three years. I played them a lot of times. I know a lot about them, and I have some friends on the team. It was exciting just when they started doing the scouting. They were like, hey, Dorka, can you help me

with this? Of course, I would love to tell you about it. I'm excited. It's going to be interesting and kind of weird that the last time I played them I was on a different team wearing a different jersey color and now I'm at UConn and it's on the big stage.

So I'm super excited because I've played them so many times and I'm excited for them to experience that, too. They're a really, really good team, and I think really have to play much better than we played on Monday to win against them, but I think it's going to be a good challenge for us.

I think they're a very aggressive offensive team, and I think they have a lot of good pieces on the guard spots, and as well in the post. I think they're a pretty complete team. We have to guard every single person on the court at that time.

I think we've just got to be very physical and just play our game, run offense, and I think it's going to be good.

Q. Could you give us a little bit of insight to Azzi's demeanor, especially during tense moments in games? You don't see that a lot from freshmen rising to the occasion during those moments.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Yeah, I thought Azzi handled herself very well. We've all been in her position before just as a freshman and it's not easy. I think she is doing everything she's supposed to do. I admire her confidence that she has as a freshman. Like Coach was saying, she ran to the ball to make those free throws, and we need guards like that. I'm just really proud of her, and she just needs to continue to do what she's been doing.

Q. Playing at this time of year in these tournaments, is experience overstated? Is it really important? How important is experience playing here?

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: I'd say experience is important, but it's not everything, if that makes sense. If you're just ready to come out and play and you just trust your preparation, then you'll be fine. But obviously experience does hold weight, too, because you've been in this position before and you kind of know how to handle it better.

But I just feel like it's all in the preparation.

Q. Coach was asked about this, a question for any of the athletes, so obviously viewership numbers are up, there's March Madness branding behind you, in front of you now, and there's packed arenas, fans really want to see this. There's more upsets. What has been the growth of the game? There's obviously still a ways to go but it is growing. What does that mean to you as a current player and what have you seen?



OLIVIA NELSON-ODODA: As a current player it means everything because I think what makes part of the game fun is just having those fans there, having a crowd, a viewership, people supporting you. I think that's a huge part of the game and especially now.

So I think having people tune in and watch our games or even just talking about it, I think it just definitely increases viewership with people, and I think it's a really important part, especially for women's sports.

Q. Geno says you have the potential to break out offensively at any point and you did that last year in the Sweet 16, Elite 8, Final Four, 24 points in each of those games. What is it about the big stage that brings that out in you?

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: I'd say it's just a mentality. It's just a different sense of urgency in the postseason. This is something that we've been working for since June. We live for March.

I just would say my sense of urgency is always different when it comes to March, and we have a goal in mind, and the only way to get to that goal is by working hard and just giving your best efforts every game. I feel like it's just a different mentality.

Q. You've played in a lot of NCAA Tournament games and Geno said that just because of the way that the UCF game was played, there's not a whole lot that he feels that you can take from it and what happened in that game isn't necessarily what's going to happen in the next game. From your experiences in the NCAA Tournament, how important is it to just go game by game and can you take anything from past games into the next ones?

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Yeah, you can't really take -- well, you can learn from the previous game, but anything bad that happened you have to just drop it because you have to take one game at a time, and you don't want to cloud the next game with the bad stuff from the last game. Does that make sense?

But obviously we've watched film and we've learned from the UCF game, but now our focus is on Indiana. Again, we're just trying to take it game by game and just really lock in for tomorrow.

OLIVIA NELSON-ODODA: Yeah, just going off what Christyn said, you can't really focus too much on that game, especially focusing on the negatives. Just kind of taking the positives from it and moving on. I think that's

really important, just not getting caught up on any of the bad things that happened and carrying that over into Saturday's game.

I think that's just important for us moving on with any of these games.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: All we know is we got the W, and that's all that matters.

Q. For all of you, why do you think this team might be particularly ready for a tournament setting amid how the regular season was with your group trying to get all of these grittier wins that you had to get during this hard regular season?

DORKA JUHASZ: I mean, I think it's been a crazy year, and it's been a lot of ups and downs. We had to go through a lot of things that I think none of us -- I mean, me in my past three years I've never experienced.

I think it kind of prepared us for whatever comes, whatever is coming. I think it kind of taught us to have that underdog mentality, wherever we go, whoever we play, it doesn't matter the seeding. But kind of that aggressiveness that comes with that, that from the tip we have to be super, super aggressive, we have to show that we're the tougher team, we're the most together, we have the most team chemistry.

It brought us together. I think if these things didn't happen, I don't know if we would be at the same level with like all the team chemistry and being on the same wavelengths with each other.

I think that was very, very useful for us just to rely on each other, trust each other, so I think that helped us a lot. I think we saw that in the past month especially, having everybody back.

But I think that's what we all need going forward. We are going to play a really good Indiana on Saturday, so I think that's going to be a difference maker how we can just trust each other on the court and help each other. And if somebody has a bad game, somebody else has to step up.

I think that's all it's been about this year.

OLIVIA NELSON-ODODA: I think this season has really taught us that it's important to really grind games out and that things aren't just going to be handed to us just because we're UConn. So I think that's the biggest lesson we learned this year. Because in previous years we kind of had this expectation where we come in, roll in and win games, and this year that was the complete opposite. And



I think every game we really had to grind it out and really fight for that, and I think that even helped us with Monday's game, just staying composed, staying in the moment, and just realizing, okay, if we really want to win this game, if we want to finish it out the right way, this is what we need to do to win it and just grind it out.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: I think in the previous years, me being a senior, throughout the year we have all these 30-point blowouts and we're not really used to having these close games throughout the season. So when we get to the tournament and we have those grind-it-out games, we're really not used to being in that position.

But all the things that we've been through this year, we've had all those grind-it-out games pretty much the entire season. I feel like for the tournament we're prepared for anything that's thrown at us and not going to get caught off guard because we've been in that position before.

Q. Christyn, this is kind of in line with the question that was just asked, but the way that the tournament ended last year, you admitted that maybe the team underestimated Arizona, Coach said he thought you guys handled it -- just weren't really mature enough. How do you feel like you've grown in that area? Is it kind of what you just said or are there other ways individually or collectively you guys have been able to grow since what happened then?

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Yeah, we've definitely learned from that game to not ever take anybody lightly and just come out and try to throw the first punch every game. I think that's the biggest thing is just to not take anybody lightly. We've definitely learned from that game. I don't even want to talk about it.

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