

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

Saturday, March 26, 2022

Bridgeport, Connecticut, USA

Webster Bank Arena

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Paige Bueckers

Chrystin Williams

Olivia Nelson-Ododa

Sweet 16 Media Conference

UConn - 75, Indiana - 58

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, when the brackets come out, generally speaking, when the brackets come out, you don't sit there and go, I hope this team wins, I hope this team loses, because whatever team you want to lose is going to win for sure. You don't ever do that. You just try to prepare for every team in your bracket mentally the best you can.

But when I did see our bracket and I saw Central Florida in there, I knew that was going to be a grind. I saw Notre Dame in there and I knew that was going to be an emotional grind. And obviously NC State is the No. 1 seed, and they've been as good as anybody all season long. I think the team that -- I said this the other day, that really kind of escaped people's radar is one of the toughest teams that we've played all year long. Playing Indiana is probably as difficult an assignment as there is for your guards. Their guards put so much pressure on your guards. They're so aggressive with the ball.

And I thought we did an amazing job defensively. I thought that was the difference in the game, that we were able to get the stops that we needed and not let them play to their strengths, which was let their guards really, really go off, and then that spurt in the third quarter really kind of put us in great position.

You know, these three guys here sitting to my right, I'm thrilled for two of them, Christyn and Liv, because they've been through a lot in these four years in the NCAA



Tournament. They missed one, and they really played tonight like they didn't want the season to end.

Paige is Paige; she's not quite there yet, but she's further along than she has been. All in all, it was a hell of an effort by our guys against a terrific, terrific team.

Q. I'd like to ask Christyn and Paige, what was the key to that third quarter spurt coach mentioned, you guys coming out for the second half?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think it was just starting the second half out strong. We didn't really like the way the first half ended, so just turning that around, and I think it starts with our energy on defense always. Once that picks up, our offense is better.

We started pushing the ball in transition more, got a few easy buckets there. I thought we played with a lot better pace and just better energy coming out in that second half.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Yeah, like she said, we were not happy how the first half ended. They got an easy three at the buzzer. So I guess the emphasis at halftime was just come out straight out the gate with our defense. Like we have to be aware of what's going on at all times, and I thought we did a great job with that, and then we got easy buckets in transition.

I thought we did a good job of executing our game plan.

Q. Christyn, can you talk about your defense on Grace Berger? I think you guys held her to like two points in the first half. I assume she was a key to stopping this game.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Yeah, she was absolutely the key. I knew I was going to have a tough -- we knew we were going to have a tough assignment with her. She's a great guard. Her pull-ups are crazy, and she's a strong guard. So we just knew that was an emphasis coming into the game that we were going to have to stop her, and I thought we did a great job with it.

Q. Christyn, you looked like Magic going down the



court early in the third quarter, but the question that Coach was talking about, you guys' defense in the third, but you guys made an adjustment, you were on Ali in the second quarter and you were really physical and changed her whole perspective, how she was changing shot. What did you do in the second period to throw off her game?

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: In the second quarter or the third quarter?

Q. Third quarter.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: I just tried to stay on her at all times. She runs off of a lot -- screens off the ball, so I was trying to stay on her hip, and I knew she was going to try to get into her pull-up or get to the basket. So I was trying to stay between her and the basket as much as I could.

And I thought my teammates did a great job of being there when I wasn't there and just being in help side. It was a total team effort, and I just thought we did a great job with her.

Q. Paige, this was the game where you took the most shots since coming back, and it looked like you were just trying to be aggressive from the get-go. Was that something that you thought you might have to do coming into the matchup, or was that something based off how the game was going you thought you might have to be a little bit more aggressive out there than before?

PAIGE BUECKERS: It's something Coach has been harping on me about a lot, and it helps me just to not think if I come out aggressive out of the gate. It's easy to come back from an injury and think a lot and second-guess your decisions.

But I thought it helped me a lot just coming out of the gate aggressive just because I didn't have to think about anything, I just played basketball and I took what the defense gave me. My teammates did a great job of getting me open, and it was sort of how they were playing the game, sort of their schemes on defense, and the shots that I got.

But I think just coming out aggressive helped me a lot.

Q. You got banged up in the first quarter, I saw you went to the bench to get some tape on your knee. Were you feeling okay physically out there?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, it was an aggressive game. I knew I was going to take some hits on both sides, but

that's basketball, and I love it. I'm fine.

Q. Paige, I asked Christyn and Olivia yesterday, but while you were out, how do you think maybe the adversity that you and the whole group dealt with this season maybe better prepared you all for this tournament and what it takes to play and compete and win in this tournament?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think it really highlighted our depth. Different people having to step up. I think there was almost double-digit starting lineups during the season.

It's just everybody gained a whole lot of confidence, and you know in a tournament different people are going to have to step up at different times, not one person can carry a team to a National Championship.

So I think with last game, the first game, different people are stepping up. Azzi had a really great game last game and started to carry the load scoring, and then today it was a really well balanced attack.

And I think that's the best thing that came out of all this adversity was just the confidence that everybody got that no matter what we have each other's back and we're going to step up for each other.

Q. Liv, I was wondering, Coach was talking about the seniors, how you played with a sense of urgency today. Can you just talk about how happy you are to get this win and how you came out in the third quarter just kind of fired up to get this win?

OLIVIA NELSON-ODODA: Yeah, I think these past four years have been pretty unusual for especially me and Christyn, but coming into a tournament, we don't take these games lightly. We definitely don't take it for granted, and just to be able to play together and get a win like this today really means a lot to us, and just in terms of carrying on to the next game, too.

Q. Liv, you and Aaliyah almost single-handedly out-rebounded Indiana. How big of a key was that going into the game, and how much momentum did you get, especially on the offensive glass, just being able to dominate that end of the ball?

OLIVIA NELSON-ODODA: Yeah, I think throughout the season rebounding has been a point of emphasis, especially from the coaches, and just going out there today, I think staying in an aggressive mentality and just keep attacking, keep crashing the boards was really huge for us.

Q. For Olivia, you've worked with Aaliyah Edwards a lot, and lately she's taken on some extensive responsibilities over the past few weeks, so what can you say has been the biggest change in her game and how has she responded to these extended opportunities?

OLIVIA NELSON-ODODA: I think just her confidence. You've been able to see her growth throughout the entire season, and I think she's really peaking at the right moment, and you can definitely see it when she plays. She's aggressive and she keeps that mentality throughout the entire game, and she really contributes a lot on both ends.

I think just being able to see that growth from her throughout the entire season.

Q. Geno, I assume going into the game rebounding is going to be a strategy; did you think that you would be so dominant offensively rebounding in that game? Did you see those kind of opportunities when you were scouting?

GENO AURIEMMA: No. No. I just think offensive rebounding is a part of the game that is -- it's not something that a lot of players take pride in. It's not something that players aspire to be. This isn't the old days where you had players make a living out of being great offensive rebounders.

But in the NCAA Tournament, we talk a lot -- going into this game we did especially, about we're going to get open shots. We know that. We don't have problems generally speaking getting open shots. But we need to give ourselves more possessions than just that one shot because whenever it's a possessions game where there's -- a game is a high possession game or a low possession game, it plays to our strengths.

Today we had almost 20 more shots than they did. When you do that, it's usually because of second shots. We're a good offensive team, and to give us more than one shot, that's allowing us to do what we do best. But it takes a lot of work and not everybody is willing to do it. We wouldn't be talking about it in these terms if that was our thing all year. We would just say, hey, you guys have been doing this all year. No, we haven't. This is not an easy thing to do, to offensive rebound.

Luckily we had two guys tonight that were fantastic at it.

Q. That was quite a three- or four-minute stretch to open the third quarter. Seemed like everything went right. What did you see from your team at that point

and what was key to that?

GENO AURIEMMA: I told them in the locker room, during that stretch there was a look about us that we felt exceptionally confident. We knew exactly where we were going. We knew where the ball was going. We knew where the shots were coming from. We could pick and choose which shots we wanted to take, and we got more lay-ups than we had gotten in the previous two quarters. Paige making that three on the inbounds play.

We just spread it -- Christyn became really active. We're at our best when we're going up and down the floor. I don't think any team in this tournament wants to walk the ball up the floor and run their offense for 40 minutes. The reason there's teams still playing is because they're really, really good defensive teams.

If you think you can walk the ball up the floor against any of the teams that are left and just run your stuff and think you're going to get any shot you want, you're crazy. You've got to get easy buckets, and we managed that do that.

Q. Just talk about that defense and how locked in you guys seemed to have been the last three or four weeks. The second thing is can you talk about the Big East and how you have two teams in the Elite Eight with you guys and obviously the surprise run by Creighton.

GENO AURIEMMA: Man, Peacocks and the Blue Jays, man, right? It's great. Great stories. Our league gets a bad rap sometimes, man. People love to do that. I don't know who gave them the term Power Five, whatever the hell that meant, but I know they have all the money. I know that some of the schools in our league don't have anywhere close to what some of the schools in those other leagues have.

But what they do have is damn good basketball players, and I think it's proven out this tournament that when our teams lose to each other in our league, it should be treated the same way like other leagues where they go, oh, they're so tough in that league, they just beat each other up throughout the whole year. Well, if you're that beat up, you shouldn't go to the tournament then.

In my mind, first we got four teams in, which was incredibly good for the Big East, and then we got two in the final eight. It's pretty damn good, man. It's going to be even better next year because we've got a lot of these kids coming back on all these teams in the Big East. And Villanova is going to win a National Championship on the men's side, too, just in case you were wondering.

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Q. When Paige is hitting shots like that like she was hitting in the third quarter, does that give the rest of the team more confidence do you think? It seemed like they kind of fed off of that.

GENO AURIEMMA: Paige?

Q. Yeah.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I mean, there's a little bit of a conundrum that we have. We really want Paige to do well because she's coming off of a big, big surgery, and we want her to play well. We know how good she is, so we want her to be the Paige that she was. What you don't want is to sit around and root for Paige while the game is going on instead of playing basketball.

It's been a little bit of finding ourselves again, how much do we want to cheer for Paige and how much do we need to just play basketball and make shots and let her figure her own way out out there.

Today she took a more assertive role, which I like for her to do. But you can tell that she hasn't played in a long time, so she doesn't have the same stuff she used to have. But each day it gets more and more like it used to be. But it doesn't have to be as good as it was because everybody else around her is a lot better than they were.

Q. You mentioned Christyn and Olivia in the opening. How important is it for Christyn to be locked in the way she has been in the Big East Tournament and now just in a more aggressive mentality?

GENO AURIEMMA: Man, you're a senior and you're playing in the NCAA Tournament, it's like you're fighting for your life, right? It's your last chance to make it work, and you don't want to leave anything to chance.

You want to make sure that you take care of all the things you're supposed to take care of, that you are mentally and physically ready to go and that -- you can't keep pushing it off on somebody else.

As a freshman you can say, well -- or as a sophomore -- you get to be a senior, I don't care how good Paige or Azzi or any of these other young guys are, it doesn't matter, there comes a point when you're a senior and you've played as much basketball as Christyn and Liv have, where you have to put it on your own shoulders and go, I have control over how this ends. They actually do. They have more control than I do. So you have to exercise that control, and that's what she's doing for the first time in her career.

Q. While you're still playing -- you mentioned Paige is getting closer to what she was. What do you like about this five that you seem to be kind of sticking with? They're rolling, and obviously you're not going to break it up when it's going well, but what do you like about this core?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I made a concerted effort, I wanted to play nine players today. I wanted to play nine players. We got nine in. Just some people sometimes when they get in are more effective than others, so you've got to watch and see what do they have today.

But unfortunately some people need a lot of minutes to be effective. But unfortunately in the NCAA Tournament you don't have time. So you've got to get it done right away. So it's kind of -- it's just nobody's fault, it just is what it is.

Nika helps us out by fouling a lot so that gets us to get somebody else in the game. But everyone has a role to play on our team. And it depends on what night it is, what your role is going to be that night, which is what I really like.

Q. The UCF game, you always talk about it's not going to be we're going to win by 20 or 30 points. How much did that game affect today, where you always want to get the message to your team to always be on your A game, but it's never going to always be easy. How much did that game kind of roll into this and get you guys going the way that you played today?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it's a good point. You watch all these games on television, and they're all -- they all go down to the wire for the most part. You watch yesterday's game, they're all within eight points, something like that.

So you know every game is supposed to be hard. But at UConn, when you've made it look easy enough times, the expectation sometimes is why isn't this easy tonight. Why are we struggling so much? Then you have to remind them, this is part of the deal. The struggle is part of the deal. Just because we managed to avoid it a lot of times, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Monday was a huge reminder to our team, that, yo, this is how these things go. You don't just roll in, have a conversation with the other team and go, what do you want the score tonight to be? You've got to go out and beat their ass. They're not going to lose. Nobody is going to lose to you in this tournament. You've got to go out and beat them.

It's getting harder and harder every year, let me tell you.



We saw that first game. Man, every game is hard. Every game is a grind. These kids don't want their season to end. Nobody does. Nobody does.

Q. When Aaliyah is able to play like this, you mentioned her rebounding, but just the intensity she brought, I think she had a charge maybe early that she took, what can that help you guys do long-term with the team the rest of the season?

GENO AURIEMMA: As I said, everybody has a particular role to play. Aaliyah knows exactly what that role is for us. I can't have a conversation with Liv where I go, Liv, I want you to go out there and knock people around. Really? But Aaliyah can. And Aaliyah can be physical and Aaliyah can assert herself and she can carve out space and she can get an offensive rebound that very few people can get to because she's strong enough and quick enough.

And defensively we can switch her out on a lot of different players, and she can help us defensively. And believe it or not, she's probably our best free-throw shooter other than Azzi right now. So she was really, really pissed at herself for missing those two free throws and then it affected her for a couple minutes.

But everybody has a role to play in everything, right. That doesn't mean they always love their role, enjoy their role. Everybody wants to be up here talking to you guys because they were the leading scorer or the leading this or the leading that, but that's not how you win championships. Everybody has got to do a little bit, and tonight Aaliyah did a lot.

We talk about it all the time, you just want people to kind of be -- you never want them to be -- like oh, you were really good during the season. You don't want to be bad today, right? You don't need to be 10 times better than you were during the season, either. You just need to be as good as you've ever been. Not better, just good. Good, good, good.

Q. We saw Notre Dame fall today at the last moment to NC State because of a lack of composure responding to a high-pressure defense. There was a point in the fourth quarter where Indiana was hanging around, maybe down 11 or 13 points. I'm curious what did your team do to make sure that Indiana didn't battle back, and how would you judge their level of composure, especially considering how well Indiana defends backcourts?

GENO AURIEMMA: There's things that we do at practice that our players look at me like why do we have to do this. A lot of it is because working on your jump shot and

working on your ball handling and working on your shooting or your rebounding or your defense, whatever, is a skill.

So is learning how to handle high-intensity situation by keeping your composure. That just comes real easily to some people. Some people are never flustered by anything. Other people get flustered at the first sign of pressure.

It's work every day. It's work every day. Monday it could be completely different. Monday we could have a complete breakdown. Who knows.

But generally speaking, these are things you work on. Does it work all the time? No. Sometimes the best kids under the toughest situations don't handle themselves very well. It's not anything wrong with that. That just happens. Kids miss free throws that are great free-throw shooters because they mean so much.

I thought we handled -- I thought the one big play really when they pressed us was E breaking the press by herself and finding Paige for a lay-up. I think that kind of got our team going. Yeah, if they keep pressing us, we're going to keep doing that, as opposed to a team presses you and you turn it over three times, now it's over. Now you might as well just hand them the ball and warm up the bus.

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