

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional Final - UConn vs NC State

Sunday, March 27, 2022

Bridgeport, Connecticut, USA

Webster Bank Arena

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Paige Bueckers

Azzi Fudd

Olivia Nelson-Ododa

Aaliyah Edwards

Christyn Williams

Elite 8 Media Conference

Q. Paige and Azzi, if you could both speak to this. Obviously at the beginning of the season there was so much anticipation of the two of you playing together and injuries kind of got in the way of that. Now in the last few games you've been starting together, playing more together again. How has the process been of getting used to playing with one another again and how is it working out? How do you see the effect on defenses?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think it's just been an adjustment for everybody, the different lineups we've had to play with, the camaraderie that we've had to build over the whole season, just because everybody has been in, everybody has been out. I don't think it's just me and Azzi type of thing. I think it's just everybody trying to build this chemistry back up. As we're all healthy right now except Aubrey.

But Azzi I think it's really easy to play with her. She's a really good player. So getting back in the flow of that, it's easy. But yeah, I would just say it's a whole team thing.

AZZI FUDD: I agree with what she said. It's been kind of a challenge for all of us with all the different lining startups and injuries to now have everyone back, figuring out our rolls. But we've gotten past that point and I think it's fun to play with everyone now and it's easy to play with someone



like Paige who is a great facilitator and gets you easy looks.

Q. Olivia, I was wondering about your passing, which obviously benefits everyone on stage here. Is that part of your game, something that you felt was a strength throughout your career, so to speak, or is that something that has really developed over the past four years and in what ways?

OLIVIA NELSON-ODODA: I think it's something that's really just developed over the past four years, especially before coming to college, that I never really did that in that sense in terms of being a facilitator like that.

But I think the big part of why I'm able to do that is because of my teammates and just their ability to get open, make the right cuts and kind of just position themselves in a way that they know is best for them to get open and score. So I give a lot of credit to them for that.

Q. Paige, knowing how much you like to be in the gym and working on your game, I wondered how you kind of filled in that void when you weren't able to.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Sort of kind of hard to fill the void when you're not even able to stand. It was a tough time for me, obviously, just knowing how much I love the game and how much it just brings me joy. But I would say I definitely spent all my time watching the game, whether it be the NBA, college basketball that's going on, women's and men's. I think that helped me just being able to watch the game, and then being with my teammates was definitely a helper, too. It's easy to isolate yourself and be sad during these times, but they kept me grounded, they kept me happy and they just kept me motivated to get back on the court.

Q. Azzi, you and Jakia obviously go back a little bit from your days in the WCAC. What do you remember about facing her specifically and that WCAC title game against her?

AZZI FUDD: We go back even before that, but it's just been a lot of fun. We've had a lot of great games against



each other. She's a really good player, and I'm excited to play tomorrow and bring those memories back.

Q. What's it like to have so many WCAC players represented this far into the NCAA Tournament?

AZZI FUDD: It's really exciting to see just for the league, but it's exciting because we've kept good relationships through, so see all the girls I grew up playing against now doing well in college, I'm proud of them.

Q. Azzi, I was wondering about finally Paige being back. You came here for a lot of different reasons, but one of them was because she bugged you so much. Just on a personal note, is it nice to be on the court with her and kind of be getting in sync just personally as well as basketball-wise?

AZZI FUDD: It has been a lot of fun. She did bug me a lot, but we had talked a lot about like possibly playing against each other before in high school. And so getting to now finally do this and now be in the Elite 8 together is a lot of fun.

Q. Azzi, do you still feel like a freshman at this point? I know you obviously sat out a lot of the season, but do you feel like you have enough games under your belt that you feel that experience with you, and just knowing that you have the four people on stage with you that have been on this stage before, have you leaned on them to get advice or just follow their example of what it means to be playing at this stage at this moment?

AZZI FUDD: I would say I do feel like a freshman still in the sense that all of this is so exciting. And I don't know if it is still so exciting to you guys as it is to me, but I know Christyn can say I bug her all the time, and I'm like, oh, my gosh, I can't believe we're here, I can't believe we're playing, and she kind of rolls her eyes sometimes.

Q. Aaliyah, your aggressiveness is obviously super important to the team, but the last two games there's been a lot of fouling. How do you try to remain successful without getting into that foul trouble?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I think Coach talks a lot about just playing smart, so just making sure that you're being aggressive but also being smart at the same time. But I do need to be on the court rather than on the bench with foul trouble.

But just going to continue being aggressive but just keeping in mind how smart I'm playing.

Q. Christyn and Olivia, curious how much does your experience help you guys in this game? Geno has always said this is the hardest game to win. They don't have that experience. How much does it help you guys?

OLIVIA NELSON-ODODA: I think it's pretty easy, especially when you're younger to just get caught up in the environment, the fans, the energy of the game. Everything is just kind of brand new and kind of different than what you're used to experiencing. So I think that's kind of a big key to it, too, is just kind of adjusting and settling in to the environment you're playing in and just what you're seeing and stuff. Not to mention the level of competition, too.

I think just kind of already experiencing those kind of things and those factors is definitely help in games like this.

Q. Paige, Coach talked yesterday about the importance of senior play at this time of year, how well both of these guys have played, especially yesterday. Can you just talk about what it means -- everybody looks at you or Azzi about trying to lead this team, but these guys are doing a tremendous job.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, they've been doing it their whole careers here, just playing with a whole lot of passion, playing with a whole lot of heart. Just to have that senior leadership to lean on. I know there's a lot of pressure that can be put on them because they're seniors and they're supposed to do it, but the way they've stepped up this whole tournament and this whole year has been crucial for us.

Two of the guys that have been in the lineup for the most part, a lot of us has been in and out, so they've kind of been the rock for us and the ones we could lean on and count on when we need them. I love both of them, I'm going to miss them so much, and I just want to keep playing as long as we can, and they do a really good job of helping us continue.

Q. Paige and Aaliyah, you guys got to go through this experience last year and you guys have been through this before. How has the coaching staff maybe been a little bit different this year compared to years past, or just kind of helping you through this experience and the Sweet 16 and all of this?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I don't think it's necessarily anything that they did differently. We're still playing UConn basketball, but I think it's more just the environment, atmosphere has changed. We're not in a bubble anymore, but we're playing at home or we're moving locations and playing there. Just the environment is changing, but we're



just staying true to our strengths and just doing everything we can to be successful.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: I don't think anything has changed. They're still doing the same thing they've been doing since my freshman year, and that's just making sure that we're ready offensively and defensively and just continuing to, like she said, work on our strengths and weaknesses and just keep getting sharper on the things that we need to work on. So I don't think -- they haven't changed much.

Q. I know you guys are focused on the game, but as teams advance further in this tournament and more opportunities have popped up to make money, I'm wondering how has that manifested itself for you guys, and do you feel the women are getting as many NIL opportunities as the men?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Well, for me, I've sort of canceled out this whole NIL stuff during the month of March. I told my agency, I told the people in my circle, I just want to strictly focus on basketball this month. It's what I wanted to do all year but sort of off days and stuff we'd sort of get some stuff done.

But I think our whole team, we put basketball first and everything behind that comes second. But it's really exciting just for the opportunities that we're getting this year with the NIL opportunities. And I think women's basketball is doing really well in that regard, just with the opportunities we're given, and sort of the chances we're getting in the field. I think we're taking great strides with it, and I think that's really important for the growth of our game.

Q. Paige and Azzi, you've both been through long-term injuries, missed a lot of time, going through rehabs, and obviously some overlap this year. How have you helped each other through those times? How has that become part of your relationship as teammates and friends, that you've had to kind of help each other through those long rehab periods?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, so when I was out this year, I felt bad just because our team was going through so much, and really like figuring out who they were and kind of like our team's identity, and I felt like I couldn't help at all because I wasn't on the court. So I tried to do a lot of just watching film and basketball, and that's something Paige has helped me with because I wasn't really a big -- I didn't really watch much basketball outside of my games or people we were playing. And so she helped me just kind of watch more games, so I think that really helped me adjust quicker to when I started playing again.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I think, like I said before, it's really easy to sort of isolate yourself and get down in times where basketball is being taken away from you when you love it so much. Just being able to surround yourself with your teammates and especially Azzi being someone who went through the same thing that I did with her knee surgery, just having somebody to lean on and talk to that's gone through the same thing. Because it's easy for people to say, oh, I understand what you're going through, but they've never been through it. So just to have somebody like that to lean on who's been through the same thing just keeping you positive and keeping you motivated is really important.

Q. Paige, we're obviously seeing you a little bit more mobile and doing a little bit more stuff each game. One of the most obvious things about your pre-injury play was how constantly you moved around the court when you didn't have the ball. I've felt like there's been a little less of that. Is that by design so that they're not beating you up as you cross through the middle or is that just part of the rehab process?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I sort of think it's also me just getting back into game shape. I kind of just sort of jumped into game play and started. With the minutes progressing and me starting to play more, I've started to be able to move more. And it's also just me being confident in my movements and being able to be confident enough to know that I can run around and do all the same things I did pre-injury.

I think just from game to game I'm gaining more confidence and more, I would say, endurance to do all those things.

Q. Christyn and Paige, so much is made about the off-the-court stuff with the tournament, March Madness behind you, 68 teams, the swag bags that are equal now. Have you noticed things off the court that makes this better or more what you were hoping it would be? And then on the court being able to play a game or games in front of fans unlike last year when you were in the bubble where there wasn't the same situation, is this what you were hoping it would be like for the NCAA Tournament as opposed to last year?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I mean, for us sophomores and freshmen, we're all just excited for this opportunity to play in front of fans. It's our first time being in the tournament where it's actually sort of like a tournament really where there's fans and stuff that can attend. But this is the first year that it's actually March Madness for women. I didn't even know that last year. I was thinking the whole time I was playing in March Madness. For that to actually be a real thing now, I think it's extremely important for just



the growth of the game and us continuing to get that respect. I'm seeing a lot more attention in the media and just on social media and on ESPN and all the media outlets.

It's definitely not where it needs to be, but change isn't going to happen overnight, and you can see the growth. I think last year -- I don't think that such a negative thing had to happen for stuff to change, but I mean, change is going to come, and it has to come now rather than later.

I think we're making strides, but there's always going to be room for improvement.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think we are making strides. Like she said, I think the biggest thing right now that has changed is stuff on social media. I've been seeing a lot more women's basketball being displayed on social media, so that's such a great thing for the growth of the game.

Then everything that I expected in the tournament, yeah, I mean, it was very different last year. These guys didn't even know what the real March Madness experience is. I'm really excited that we get to play in front of fans and have our crowd here. It's a lot more fun that way.

Q. Paige and Azzi, you've mentioned watching a lot of basketball outside of your own game. Any specific teams, players you watch and things you're looking to apply to your game? And, Azzi, what specifically has Paige introduced you to in that regard?

AZZI FUDD: I've watched a lot more NBA than I've ever watched in my life. I don't think I was looking to apply any of that to my game, but just watching to kind of just learn and see and, I don't know, just watching.

PAIGE BUECKERS: I don't know, I think just some people play the game, some people love the game, but I think I live the game. Anytime there's basketball on the TV I'm going to watch it. I don't really watch shows much anymore just because basketball has been on so much. But I think Steph is a great player to watch, Kyrie is a great player to watch, obviously LeBron and KD, but stuff they do I'm not going to be able to do.

I think college basketball is great, too, just because it's so much different than the NBA and the professional and the WNBA, so just seeing other players and what they're able to do in the game, you can always learn and apply it to yours.

GENO AURIEMMA: Not much to say, right? You're just glad to be playing tomorrow. You kind of work all year for

an opportunity to play in this game, and when it finally comes, you hope you've done everything you can to prepare for it. You know you're going to be playing a really, really good team and you know you're going to have to play your best.

I've always said it's the most challenging game of the year, even more so than for the winner next weekend, next weekend's games. I think tomorrow's game is way more challenging.

Q. What are the biggest challenges that NC State presents for you? They've been solid all year, very good all year.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, well, that's it right there. They're solid. They're experienced. They know how to win. They play great together. They don't seem fazed by anything. They had 9 million reasons to lose that game yesterday, and they ended up winning it. It just goes to show you their resolve and their ability to just play and play the whole 40 minutes.

When it's time to make big plays, they made them. That's the sign of an experienced team, well-coached team, composed and talented. It's everything you would expect in a team that's won the ACC three years in a row.

Q. I know NC State and UConn haven't played in a while. I was just wondering do you have a relationship with Wes at all? Do you know Wes or have you kind of watched him from afar as he's rebuilt this program?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I've known Wes since he was an assistant at NC State, way back. Had a chance to spend a lot of time with him. As a matter of fact, when he was at UT Chattanooga, he came up to practice for a couple days up in Storrs and we hung out for two or three days. It was just a matter of time until -- hopefully a matter of time until he got an opportunity such as the one at State, and obviously he's taken advantage of that opportunity.

He's a terrific coach. He's a terrific guy. He was doing all these things at Chattanooga, just not as many people notice when you're doing it at that level versus doing it at a place like State that had so much tradition and so much success over the course of their history.

Q. I know having a post player who can pass really well is crucial to what you try and do offensively and it seems like Liv has really developed into a great passer for you guys. What have you seen from her in four years in that part of the game? And when you recruit post players, how important is it to bring in kids that are already good passers or is that something you



bank on being able to develop over their time in your program?

GENO AURIEMMA: The latter part of your question, I think the way we practice and what we stress and what we value, I think our big kids become good passers. It helps if they want to be. It helps if they're unselfish. So when you're looking to recruit a kid, you're hoping that you can find someone that does have a feel for the game, does have a sense of wanting to be more than just going to block, catches, and score.

We've been fortunate -- like you said, we've had some great ones that have played that position. And over the last four years, Liv has become a little bit better each year. For a post player to have over 100 assists, that's saying something. It's something that we put in a lot of time and effort, and it's paid off for her, and for us.

Q. I know you're probably going to say it's the first time for this team so it's not the same, but NC State hasn't been to this spot in 24 years. You've been to 16 straight Elite 8s and 13 straight Final Fours. What is it about you guys that basically everyone just pens you into the Final Four every time that you can keep on doing this consistently and not slip up? You always say in this game a player steps up to get to the Final Four. Do you have any idea who that may be to get you to the Final Four tomorrow night? Or do you think it might be different because there hasn't been one star to get you to this point?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think the more times you're in this situation, the more you realize how many people are not fortunate enough to be in this situation often. So you realize how -- when you look back, how difficult it must have been to get here this many times in a row. And even more, how difficult it's been to win 13 of them in a row.

Sitting here right now, looking at tomorrow night, it doesn't go, we always win that game. It doesn't make me feel any good. You still have to go out and win that game, and whether this is your first time or whether it's your however many time, this game is the same. It's going to be played the same way.

First regional we ever played in we beat NC State in the Sweet 16, and that was our first one ever, and they have been there a bunch of times. So who knows, history might repeat itself the other way. Previous history I don't think has anything to do with what happens tomorrow night.

We're in this game a lot because we have really good players that come to UConn and they understand that if you come to Connecticut, the expectations are incredibly

high, the bar is set very, very high, and -- I'd like to say you have a choice, but I don't think you have a choice if you come and play there, you'd better get yourself into this game.

To your point, I think your program the way it's set up and the way you do things, the tradition that you have, the culture that you've established, I think your program can get you to this weekend a lot of times. Because you look at -- a lot of teams have gotten to this weekend a lot. I mean, but to get out of this weekend, I think you do need one player, two preferably -- or when we had Stewie, three -- that are going to play great and they're the one that get you to next weekend. And then if you're fortunate enough to get to the next weekend, those guys better play great again if you want to win.

I think your program can only get you so far, and this is probably the end of the road unless somebody steps up and plays spectacularly well. Who that is, I don't know, because again, we haven't had our team together except for the last three or four weeks. Could be anybody at this point.

Q. Yesterday you talked about the skill of learning how to handle high intensity situations by keeping your composure. Who on your team do you think has shown the most growth in learning that skill, and what moments stick out to you about them showing that growth?

GENO AURIEMMA: Hmm, good question. I think they've taken turns. As you said, I don't think it comes natural to most kids. I think it is a learned skill. I do think you have to be in that situation a lot of times in order for you to feel comfortable in it.

I would like to say that over the course of four years, the ones that have been there the most, in this case Liv and Christyn, you would think that they have a better understanding of how to handle these situations better. But I've been really impressed with how Azzi has handled it as a freshman. It's been great to see Aaliyah play the way she played yesterday.

They're young kids. And everyone expects Paige to be able to do that, and she certainly did it last year, but you kind of really do depend on your more experienced kids. Like Monday night when we had to go to the free-throw line to make free throws, Azzi made a couple, Christyn made a couple. Those are huge. People don't realize how difficult those are.

Tomorrow is the most intense situation that they will have faced, so hopefully they can handle it. Hopefully.



Q. I wanted to ask you about rebounding tomorrow. Obviously NC State is a pretty good rebounding team. You guys rebounded really well yesterday. Do you think that performance carries over to tomorrow, or hard to tell?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, you would think that rebounding is something that you take pride in that you do all the time, that you can count on it happening every game. But the reality of the situation is it doesn't always happen, for whatever reason. But I do think as you go on in this tournament, really the thing that separates you from the teams that win and the teams that lose are your ability to get more shots than the other team gets. Shots are going to be hard to make in tomorrow's game, and the more of them you get, the better chance you have. The less that they get, the better chance you have. So rebounding takes care of both of those things. The other guys get less, you get more.

We have the ability to be a really, really good rebounding team, and yesterday we showed it. The great thing about the NCAA Tournament is you don't get any points for what you did last night, so we've got to do it again tomorrow.

Q. You're facing a more traditional big center tomorrow. Are you willing to talk a little bit about how you plan to defend her, or are you going to try to have one person do it or are you going to try to double her and give somebody else -- make somebody else make the shots? She's been terrific all year.

GENO AURIEMMA: I'll have to call Wes and ask him how he wants us to defend her, and if you want, I can call you after I talk to him. (Laughter).

Q. I asked you about this a little bit the other day. Azzi comes from one of the premier high school programs in the country and arguably the premier conference in the country for girls' basketball. Jakia, same way. They had some battles. When you're recruiting and you see a player from a WCAC school, does that catch your attention maybe a little bit more, the pedigree of that conference and so many players represented now this deep in the tournament from that conference?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it's always been the case, I think. It goes in cycles, but traditionally that northern Virginia/Maryland area has produced a tremendous amount of terrific basketball players. Heck, we had a great one that played for us, Amy Duran, that as a freshman made an incredible impact on a team that went to the Final Four.

I do think where you go to high school has great bearing on how prepared you are to play college basketball at this level. The competition is tremendous in that area. The coaching is great. So I'm not surprised that those kids are all doing well and so many of them are doing well. That says a lot about them. It says a lot about they take it seriously. Must be something, because the boys' programs are just as good.

It's part and parcel for that area. I think they do a fantastic job, both boys' and girls' high school basketball.

Q. What is it about this stage, this game in particular that is so much harder than the ones that you'll see down the line? And when you have a team with freshmen like Azzi and Caroline that make an impact or Dorka who hasn't been on this stage before, do you talk to them about how this game is harder than the rest or is it something they have to experience themselves for them to really understand?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, I've gotten to this point by not talking to them, so I don't talk to them about this stuff. I think the less they know, the better. The more they figure things out on their own, the better. Sometimes you can put a seed in their head that you think is good and it turns out not so good. So I think you've just got to let them play.

At the same time, there's something that we talk about all the time. If you play every game, which is, believe me, not easy to do, but if you play every game in the NCAA Tournament like it's the National Championship game -- so if your first-round game, you treat it like it's a first-round game, then you play in a final eight game to go to the Final Four, that means you've got to be different, right? Well, if you know you've got to be different tomorrow than you had to be Saturday, then you're already going to lose.

So to me, by us treating every game like it's the most important game -- because in reality it's not a best out of three, not a best out of five, not a best out of seven. You've got one shot and you play -- you come into this tournament undefeated, you lose once and you're done.

I want them to treat Monday's game exactly the way we treated Saturday's and exactly the way we treated last Monday's. Hopefully they don't have to do anything different than they've been doing, and take our chances. It should be good enough, and if it's not, we just lost to a better team. That's all.

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