

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 3 Semifinal - Duke vs UConn

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Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Aaliyah Edwards

Paige Bueckers

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: UConn head coach Geno Auriemma. We'll turn it over to you.

GENO AURIEMMA: All right. Well, you wait a long time to play in these games. You hope you have the right mindset like you need to have to win this time of the year. Everyone that's in this tournament, I think they're excited about the opportunity to play because it's one more step towards everyone's goal. Everyone's goal is to win a national championship.

Everyone who is playing still is obviously a tough matchup for everybody. We've done the best that we can with what we have. Here we are. Looking forward to tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. As you prepare for Duke, is there any value in the fact that you have six common opponents, you played a lot of the same teams this year?

GENO AURIEMMA: Not necessarily. I mean, I think their style of play is very, very different than our style of play. We may have played the same opponents, but that doesn't mean that the opponents played them the same way they played us.

All you can do is go by what their strengths and weaknesses are. They show up over a period of three or four months. Obviously they beat a really, really good Ohio State team on the road. They're a much younger, much different team than the team we played here last year. We're a little bit different team, as well.



I think both teams will be trying to get to know each other a little bit.

Q. You've been compensating all season for the number of players you have available. Does that become easier or harder when you get to this time of year?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think it becomes a little bit harder because of what's at stake. If someone is struggling during regular season and you don't have someone to put in for them, you lose a game, you go home, figure out and play two days later, three days later.

At this time of the year if that happens and someone's really struggling and you don't have anywhere to go, your season could end.

It's much, much more difficult right now than it would be a month ago, let's say. But hopefully they've learned how to cope with what we're dealing with.

I'm somewhat confident that our three experienced players that have been in this tournament, this is their fourth year, well Paige's third, but have enough experience to help us get through this.

Q. You caused quite a stir the other day when you said that Paige is the best player in America. Obviously a lot of people think it's Caitlin. Why do you think that Paige is the best? Can you also speak to how efficient of a player she is?

GENO AURIEMMA: I didn't realize I was causing a stir. I bet you if you asked USC, they wouldn't tell you Caitlin Clark is the best player. I bet if you asked LSU, they wouldn't tell you. I bet you if you asked Texas, they wouldn't tell you.

I think every coach thinks the player that's on their team that's helping them the most is the best player. Listen, I've coached the best player in the country a lot more than anybody else coaching in this tournament. It's okay for somebody else to say their player is.



If you go by stats, if you go by efficiency, if you go by the entire box score and what she means to our team playing power forward, I think she's done more for our team than anybody else could have done on our team. I wouldn't trade her for anybody else.

Q. How different, outside of the Paige factor, do you feel like this group is coming into the Sweet 16 compared to the one you brought in last year?

GENO AURIEMMA: Into the tournament, you mean?

Q. Yes.

GENO AURIEMMA: We don't seem to be as mentally or physically worn out like we were last year at this time. I think having Paige makes us a little more confident than maybe we were last year at this time.

I think KK gives us a different element that we didn't have last year at this time.

I would say those two things probably are the biggest difference. There's a lot of similarities, too, unfortunately. It doesn't feel the same. I think our practices and everything that we've done leading up to this feels a little bit different than it did last season.

The whole month of February last year was a real, real, real, real grind for us. I think our last hurrah was the Big East tournament. We did our best to win that thing. Then we had a huge struggle with Baylor, and we just didn't have anything left. We ran into the wrong team at the wrong time. Ohio State was just way, way, way better than us. And Duke may be way, way better than us tomorrow. Who knows.

I think we're in a better frame of mind than we were last year.

Q. Obviously things are different now, but you've had a somewhat colorful history with Duke. When you found out you were playing them, did it bring back any memories from Cameron Indoor Stadium or anything like that?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it's been so long since we've been down there. We always had some great, great matchups with them, when Gail was there, when Joanne was there. They were always one of the best teams in the country. It was always a great place to go play.

Yeah, there's great memories of us and Duke playing some great, great games. Yeah, times have changed. Times have changed. Doesn't feel the same.

Q. This is where you ended the season last year. Did you see that loss hanging over them now knowing that they're back at this point again?

GENO AURIEMMA: Half the team wasn't here last year, so if it's hanging over, it's only hanging over half of 'em. Let's hope the other half don't know what happened last year.

That's the beauty of playing in the NCAA tournament, is if you won last year, you have to put that behind you. That's not going to help you win this year. If you lost last year, you have to put that behind you because that doesn't mean you're going to lose this year.

Each and every tournament game, each and every game takes on kind of a life of its own, and you have to either be good enough to win that day or you're not going to win.

There may be things tomorrow that we can handle very easily, and we won't have to worry about what we don't have. Then there's going to be things tomorrow that are going to come up that are very, very difficult for us because it will be things we can't handle because of what we don't have.

Each and every thing has to be done on its own and you have to figure it out during those 40 minutes.

Q. We're a couple years out of the March Madness label being applied to the tournament, increased coverage. Now we have facilities dedicated to keeping the tournament on screens. What kind of opportunity does that present a player like Paige? What opportunity does it give her that some of the greats that you've seen come through in the past may not have had?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, this is the time of the year where every kid can make some kind of name for themselves and for their school.

The beauty of our game has always been that you could track those players from freshman year on. You got to grow with them. You saw them as freshmen, saw what they did, then the expectations were such as sophomores, expectations of them as juniors, expectations of them as seniors. You kept being amazed that they could do those things year after year after year. They go down as one of the greats, you know?

Now there's just more eyes on 'em. There's more media. There's more social media. There's more outlets. There's more people talking about it. There's more hype. There's

more pressure on the kids than ever before. I think they weren't under this kind of pressure back then.

You've got a whole new set of circumstances. It takes a special player to be able to handle all that. Some can and some can't.

As of right now, there's teams in this tournament that have those kinds of players. But the interesting part is, everybody's going to tune in to watch whether or not they can. We all believe that they can. But everybody is going to watch to see whether they can.

Everybody is hoping for these magical matchups where you can put them together and start the craziness. It's her against her, discounting the rest of the team. It's like a big one-on-one game coming up.

It's fun for the fans, it's fun for everybody on social media and on TV. In the end, these kids have to perform at a high level under a lot of pressure. It's a lot, but it's fun for them.

Q. You mentioned the teams are different. They're a younger team, different style. What about Duke concerns you the most? What will you have to contend with?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think defensively they're very aggressive. They can force you to play at their pace, at their tempo, the way they want to play. I believe their youth, I think, serves them well. They can move pieces around, get players in the game.

They play with a tremendously high level of energy. To me, a lot of times really young teams are the most dangerous teams. They haven't experienced a crushing loss in the NCAA tournament that they're carrying around with them. They're just free and clear, letting it rip. Let them play.

They have a big win under their belt. They're a tough matchup because they've got really good players, they're well-coached, and I think they're very confident, confident in their own abilities.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you.

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by UConn student-athletes. We'll open up the floor to questions.

Q. Paige, the other day after you guys beat Syracuse, Coach said you're the best player in America. He is

known for being challenging to play for. When he says something like that, makes that proclamation, how much confidence does that give you?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, it's very humbling. You sort of wouldn't expect him to say it because of what happens in practice and what happens in the game, how much he yells at you during that (smiling).

But just very humbling, very grateful. Obviously he's a great basketball mind, has a lot of love for the game, so you respect everything that he says.

But again, just trying to continue to get better. I know with him there's no choice. He always pushes you to be greater than you are, that you want to be, even how great you think you can be.

Just very grateful, humbling. Everybody has their opinions. Everybody has their player who they think's the greatest. But yeah, something like that means a lot from him.

Q. When and how did you find out that he said that? How would you reflect on your journey to this point?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, actually, I was sitting right next to him, so that was even more surprising. I definitely didn't think he would say that, that I could hear it.

Nah, again, just everybody knows I haven't had the smoothest sailing in college. I've had injuries, a lot of adversity. But just taking whatever life throws at me, continue to conquer it with a great mentality. I've grown a lot in my faith, in the way I approach things, in the way I take care of my body, handle myself off the court.

I think there's a lot of areas of growth, but just continue to stay humble, stay hungry, let things like that motivate me to be even better.

Q. There's so much talent in the women's game right now. Maybe not who's the best player out there, but who is someone that you would pay to go watch play right now?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Everybody (smiling). I got a lot of respect for the great players around the country. For me it's the freshman class that, like, is really impressive to see the spread-out talent-wise. Freshman-wise, they're fearless. They come in here and just compete, are stars of the game already.

Honestly, I'd pay to watch any team. It's just great basketball that we're playing, women's basketball. Women's college basketball right now is at a high and it's



great to see.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I mean, me, too. Even today and this weekend, everyone's going to be flipping through the channels. They're going to see a great game whoever the matchup is.

I think just watching women's basketball and just to see how far we've come, how we're changing the game, it's just great to watch. I don't think you really need to pay to see us play and be great.

Q. This can be a difficult time of year with the quick turnaround between the tournament and the WNBA draft. Is it freeing to have those decisions different for the both of you but made and out there ahead of time?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I didn't hear? Is it?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Have that done ahead of time.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Me, I like to live in the moment and stay present, stay locked in to what we want to accomplish for the season.

But no, I am grateful that I was just able to put it out there. But I want it to be more of a celebration than, like, a wrap-up just because we still have a lot of basketball left to play and I want to really just be present with my team and with my coaches and just with this program for the last month, for the most crucial part of our season, which is going to be this post-season.

We're two down, we have tomorrow to play, but. No, I'm grateful for what's to come, excited for what's to come in the next level in the W. Right now I'm going to stay locked in and stay ready, take on one game at a time.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I think just having that decision out of the way lets you focus on what's ahead of you and what's right now in the present without having anything in the back of your mind. Like Aaliyah said, we can just put our whole focus into the present and try to appreciate every moment we have now, embrace the moments.

Q. Paige, to your point with women's basketball exploding right now, why do you think that is? Why do you think that suddenly everyone understands how awesome this game is?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I've said this before, but women's basketball, women's sports have always been great. It's just now we're getting the attention we deserve. Again, you see us more in the media, you see us more on Instagram, Twitter, whatever exists. People are really

starting to just watch.

You see the viewership going up in the games because people are understanding that this is great basketball, great stuff to watch. I mean, it's entertaining. Yeah, I just think we're getting more accessibility in the media, on TV, on mainstream sports TV programs.

So yeah, just I think more availability.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah, I think we also have some more advocates for the game, in our game. We have, like, NBA players, WNBA players reaching back to the college game.

I think it's hitting at an international level, too. I'm from Canada. I hear a lot of praise for not only UConn, my team, but the whole NCAA, just a lot of people tapping into it. That's also great.

I think our game is speaking for ourselves right now. Our skill set is continuing to grow, the next generation is continuing to go out there and be great. I think there's more to come for us.

Q. I appreciate that you both think that women's basketball is worth paying money to see right now. If you both had to draft one player in women's college basketball, that's not on UConn right now, who are you picking?

PAIGE BUECKERS: To join our team?

Q. Or if you were starting your own team, play pickup. We're trying to get you to tell us who your favorite players are.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I think we're biased of our team.

PAIGE BUECKERS: I mean, I have a lot of choices, great choices. I think I would pick Azzi Fudd, Caroline Ducharme, Ayanna Patterson, Jana El Alfy, Aubrey Griffin, Amari DeBerry to rejoin our team (smiling).

Q. Aaliyah, what Paige said it's surprising based on how much coach yells at you in practice, you were laughing. What were you thinking when Paige said that? I think you were on the podium when he made that comment or no?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: No, I wasn't.

Q. When you saw it on social media, were you thinking, People need to talk about her more?



AALIYAH EDWARDS: I mean, yeah, I think everyone, especially on the team, just agrees with Coach's comment. We see it every day in practice. Obviously you guys see it when we play the games.

She's a crucial part of our team. She just makes stuff happen for us and impacts the game in so many different ways. Great to play alongside her. Great to have these last moments with her before I head on to the next chapter.

As far as his comment, that's just how Coach is. That's his energy. He's very tough on us, a lot of tough love on us in practice. It's when he does compliment us, it's like, Oh, you think like that of me?

No, as Paige says, it's humbling. You feel a boost of confidence when you hear that from him. Don't get me wrong, he does mention that to us. It is very rare. I think it's just a part of the process, just a part of the standard here at UConn, the culture that he's built.

Yeah, everyone loves Coach. We love Coach, so...

Q. Aaliyah, what do you remember about playing Duke here? What, if anything, can you take from that matchup, playing in this building?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: What I remember from playing them last time, it was a competitive game. Obviously we got the dub. They made us work for it.

I think what's different is we're two different teams. A year has changed both of our teams. We've got stronger. We've got faster, more athletic.

It's going to come down specific things. I think the one thing that we're going to focus on is just playing our game and controlling what's in our control.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

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