

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

Saturday, March 30, 2024

Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Paige Bueckers

Aaliyah Edwards

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

UConn - 53, Duke - 45

THE MODERATOR: Head coach Geno Auriemma and student-athletes Paige Bueckers and Aaliyah Edwards. Coach, congratulations on the win. We'll begin with your opening statement.

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't know that I have one. I'll let you guys go right ahead with the questions for the student-athletes.

THE MODERATOR: All right. The floor is open.

Q. Aaliyah, another dominant game from Paige. You said yesterday you watch her do it in practice every day. I just wonder are there times on the court that she does something and you're, like, dang, that was pretty impressive? Or do you just shrug and think, well, Paige is just being Paige?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I mean, I'm not really surprised when the ball goes in the hoop for her. But some of the moves that she gets leading up to the bucket is pretty impressive. But that's just how Paige plays basketball, and it's beautiful to watch.

Yeah. She does what she does in games in practice.

Q. Aaliyah, for you first and then Paige. Aaliyah, you came off the bench after being on for a while, you had a big jumper, got a big offensive rebound. Did you feel like when you came back into the game that you had to make a quick impact?



AALIYAH EDWARDS: Coach drew up a play, told me to get a bucket and that's what I did. We all made plays and impacted in different ways. It wasn't just me. It was a team effort. And I think that we could have made some better decisions. But we survived, and we advance.

Q. And, Paige, for you. That game was super frenetic, bodies on the floor a lot. Is that a game where you feel your short bench more because it's just so physical and so -- I mean, it was pretty hectic out there?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah. I think the game was very physical on both ends of the floor. The pace was fast, both sides, trying to push it. So you feel it, but at this point of the season, you've got to be mentally tougher. Everybody's got aches and boo-boos during this time, and it's just about who powers through it better, who's mentally tougher. So it's something we try not to really focus on.

Q. Could you guys just talk about what the next 48 hours looks like for you, just the mental preparation for the next biggest game of your career?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Tonight will be rest and recover, trying to get our bodies -- take an ice bath, get treatment done, so trying to recover that way, get good sleep. And then tomorrow will be a lot of preparation. The next day will be preparation leading up to the game. But just balancing recovering with preparing for a great opponent and a great team on Monday.

Q. For either/or both of you. Being able to hold Duke to only 18 made field goals and forced 23 turnovers, what did you think was working so well on the defensive end, especially because you guys were scoring in the 60s or 70s yourselves?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I think defensively we were just playing smarter than we did on the offensive end. I think that we took care of those possessions on the defensive end, made sure to -- made sure not -- to get them out of their flow. I think we did a good job just disrupting and being effective that way.

THE MODERATOR: Do we have other questions for our



student-athletes? In the back?

Q. Paige, you said post-game, you obviously don't get into the media, one-on-one matchups and this and that. But from a purely on-court standpoint, playing Juju on Monday, do you look at that and think that's a matchup I want to take on defensively to try and slow her down a little bit with everything that she can do for USC, or do you just kind of leave that to the game plan?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I leave it to the game plan, let the scout be the scout. I know with a great player like that, it's not an individual defensive assignment but it's a team defensive assignment. It's everybody's responsibility to try to limit her touches and shots, contain her. A great player like that, it's best to not even let her get the ball. We'll go through it, leave it up to the scout and leave it up to the game plan.

Q. Paige, KK had a really impactful game on both ends. What did you see from her, and how did she really kind of rise to this moment?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I just saw her being confident in her movements and the spots she wanted to get to on the floor on offense and defense, disrupting, just being KK, just being peste, pushing the ball up the floor, getting into the lane, creating from there. And then pressuring the ball and getting deflections, getting steals on defense.

So her just being confident, not thinking and just playing her game. I thought she did a great job tonight.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions for our student-athletes? All right. We appreciate your time. Thank you very much. See you tomorrow.

All right. We'll open it up to questions for Coach Auriemma.

Q. Geno, did that -- specifically the first half, did that remind you of the national title game against Stanford? One of those games?

[Laughter]

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, except we were on the wrong end of that one in the first half. Now, Duke's a terrific defensive team. They do a tremendous jobs of taking away some of your strengths and making you make plays that are not necessarily scripted. You have to make great reads. And it was really hard in the beginning because you felt like they have 13 points at halftime. And I felt like we should have 30.

It always comes back to get you when you leave a lot of points on the table. But scoring was not going to be easy tonight at both ends. They weren't going to have an easy time scoring against us, and we weren't going to have an easy time scoring against them.

And to one other question. The fatigue factor became a big issue, because it forced us to change our game plan, like Paige was saying. We got up 20 because we just pushed it, pushed it, pushed it.

And then I felt like, okay. We need a breather here, or we're not going to be able to finish the game. And I think by doing that, we got a little bit -- you know, kind of took a deep breath. We were exercising, and then we decided to have a cigarette, and then we didn't feel like exercising anymore.

So it's hard for us to get back into the flow of things. But I knew scoring was going to be very, very difficult, very difficult on both ends.

Q. Bringing Aaliyah back in, bringing her back into the game and having her hit that quick jumper and again that O-board, that ended up being huge for you guys. She says you just told her to go in and get a bucket. I don't know that it works that way exactly.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah. Sometimes dreams do come true, you know? We had a play earlier coming out of a time-out where we were going to isolate Aaliyah. And it was very simple. KK, take the ball, pass it to Aaliyah, and get the hell out of the way.

And we go out there, and KK goes, I don't feel like doing that. And she just goes in and gets her shot blocked by three people, not just one. And sometimes you wonder, like, whether I need an interpreter for these young guys. I know I just turned 70, but I think I still speak English. You know, I didn't revert back to -- like, my mom, when she got to a certain age, she reverted back to only Italian. I thought, I still speak English. I don't understand why that didn't translate very well.

But we did feel like their pressure was so hard on our wings that Aaliyah was going to have some breathing room. And I felt like she could either get a layup or get a wide-open jump shot. And thank God -- you know, that was a big shot, huge shot.

We've made some big plays the last two games when we really had to. I'm really proud of that.

Q. You talked about scoring being tough at both ends



tonight. What did you feel like you guys did defensively really well especially in the first half?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah. The first half, I thought we were very disciplined, very active, and we were quick to the ball. I thought if we could take away a lot of the lanes to get to the basket and force a lot of jump shots and just really clog things up, and we did a great job of that.

And I thought as the game went on, we either got mentally or physically tired. We stopped getting to our spots. And they started to exploit those driving lanes. When you get to this point, final 8 games, Sweet 16 games, nobody just gets down 15, 16 and says, ah, hell with it. We'll get the next one. There is no next one, so everybody plays their butt off to the end. So you knew it wasn't going to last the way we were making it look really easy there for a while in the third quarter.

But we couldn't sustain it. We couldn't sustain it.

Q. Congratulations, Coach, on the win.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you.

Q. You know, everybody wants to talk about the matchup against USC with Paige and just the one-on-one matchup. But looking at it on a bigger scheme, you've been here. You've done this before. So how do you prepare this team for in the next 48 hours, once again, just to really lock in and go out there and give their best effort?

GENO AURIEMMA: Kind of what I said. I mean, at this time of the year, you have -- you're staring at the end of your season. So I think players play with a certain amount of desperation and passion.

Some of our upperclassmen, they've played, and they've lost in the Final Four. They've lost in the Sweet 16. And they've lost in the national championship game. So they've had a lot of experiences throughout their four years here.

So they understand that it's USC versus UConn, not Paige versus JuJu. Because if we try to make it that -- and this has happened a lot -- somebody on their team will get 30, and then we'll all go home and go, yeah, we lost, but we did a great job on JuJu, man. Congratulations. It's got to be our team versus their team and see how it plays out.

And I'm sure they're not out there thinking, let's spend all our energy guarding Paige.

Q. Geno, Paige has talked about last season, she just was so emotional. She wanted so badly to play in the

tournament. And then she prayed a lot that she would be given that opportunity again. You've obviously helped a lot of players navigate being injured. But I wondered, how did you make sure that her spirit wasn't broken?

GENO AURIEMMA: The one thing that Paige is very, very good at, which I think all great players and great leaders, they're very, very great -- they're very, very good at hiding the things that will make them look like they're struggling or suffering or they're nonconfident anymore. Woe is me mentality. They're very good at hiding it. And Paige would come to the practice facility every day last year to do her rehab and watch practice or whatever. And she was always the most upbeat, positive person in the gym.

You knew that when she went home, she was a completely different person at home. You knew that it was killing her and tearing her apart. But great players like that, they carry a light around with them, you know? Because she's a positive player that shines light on other people.

We all know people that, they live in darkness, right? The minute they walk in a room, everybody just goes, ugh. They just suck the life out of the room. She's the opposite. She shines light on everywhere she goes.

But privately, yes. It tore her apart. I only saw it manifest itself once. We were playing at Tennessee. And, you know, you come to UConn, you want to play in a Tennessee game, even though it's not the same. It's still UConn/Tennessee, and it's at Tennessee.

And I saw her break down in the locker room that game. That was the first time I had seen it. So I know that playing in this tournament this year is why she worked so hard for 12 months to put herself in position to do this.

You know, players like her, the players in this tournament -- you know, every player, but players like her, JuJu and Kaitlyn and Angel Reese, you can name them, Cardoso and all those great players that South Carolina has, they live for these games, you know?

Regular-season games are regular-season games. But these kids, this is what they dream of when they go to college and play basketball. And if their dream's taken away from them, it's like they're half a person. And some people are just miserable and let it beat them. And some people, they don't let that happen. And Paige is one of those people.

THE MODERATOR: Unfortunately we are out of time. Coach, thank you very much. And we will see you tomorrow.

GENO AURIEMMA: I'm going to go bathe in some ice and get an ice bath.

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