

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 3 Final - UConn vs USC

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Moda Center

UConn Huskies

Head Coach Geno

Auriemma

Paige Bueckers

Aaliyah Edwards

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We have UConn Head Coach Geno Auriemma. Coach, your opening statement, and then we'll open it up for questions.

GENO AURIEMMA: Go ahead.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Geno, is there any way now to mitigate the stress of minutes on players at this stage of the game, whether it's coaching style or resting style, whatever that might be?

GENO AURIEMMA: They let us go the portal to get some people here tomorrow, which I don't see happening. We've get a 40-point lead after the first quarter, then we can rest, but I don't see that happening either.

So, no. There is no way to mitigate it. It is what it is. This is what we've got. This is how we got here, and this is how it's going to end, either for the better or for worse.

So luckily there's a day in between. Luckily the game is later in the day tomorrow, I think. What time's the game tomorrow?

THE MODERATOR: 6:00.

GENO AURIEMMA: 6:00. So it's not a noon game or something like that, but there's no alternative. Our players know that. I wish there was another way, but there isn't. And sometimes you find a lot of strength that you didn't



think you had when you're forced into a situation.

So we tried it yesterday. We tried to slow the game down, and that backfired. So I think we've just got to keep our foot on the gas pedal for as long as we can. And hope it's enough.

Q. Geno, Lindsay was telling us stories of how you guys go way back when you were recruiting Hillary and trying to use her to get Hillary to come to UConn.

What do you remember from those days? What have you seen from Lindsay over the years? She also mentioned an interaction in 2013 when she was with Cal. I think you were getting your ring sized, and you said something to her like, You can enjoy this once you've been here ten times or something like that. I don't know if you remember that either.

GENO AURIEMMA: So much has transpired in the last 40-some years. I actually forgot that they were in the Final Four, and we played them, if I'm not mistaken. No? We might have played them. Yeah? We played them.

I don't remember a lot of what happened that long ago, but I do know that when she and Hillary would come to camp, and I knew Hillary really wanted to come to UConn, and Jen Rizzotti was going to be graduating, and I was hoping that Hillary would then kind of step into that role.

Lindsay and her were best friends. So I tried to charm up Lindsay and tried to help us get Hillary. So I hope she doesn't hold it against me that I didn't think she was good enough to play for us. She did all right. She went to Brown, and everything -- you know, she lived happily ever half, and here she is now with one of the best teams in the country.

Great moments. Incredible who you run into and people that pass through your life when you've been doing this for so long. It's exciting to see them, kids like that, get into the coaching profession and have the success that she's having.

You know, her life has been a tremendous journey. She's



at an age where she can probably sense that maybe there's a few more of these in her future, you know?

So it's an exciting time to be her, and I'm happy for her. I'm proud of her. Hopefully it's something she learned at our camp that helped her along the way.

Q. Geno, I asked Paige this yesterday and wanted to get your thoughts on it. Just with how much Juju does for USC, do you think Paige, with her competitiveness, will want to take on that one-on-one matchup at times defensively tomorrow, or from a game planning standpoint are you as a coach more thinking about how can we kind of slow down their entire kind of perimeter threats? How do you think Paige will kind of buy into the defensive game plan there?

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't know how other coaches approach this, but my approach has always been, what do they have that we're going to have a problem with? Then it just becomes obsessive of, you know, how can we solve that problem? How can we solve that problem?

And then all of a sudden it dawns on you that, yeah, we've got a problem that we may not be able to solve, and that's all there is to it.

Then the other thing that hits you is, they've got a problem that they may not be able to solve. That's what makes the game such a beautiful, intriguing expectation, is that maybe neither of us are going to solve the problem, and maybe some of the other players on each team are going to end up being the difference in the game.

I don't know. I don't know. I've been in so many of these and seen so many different scenarios. I don't think that every time Juju gets a bucket, Paige is going to go out of her way to make sure she gets a bucket. I think that would be foolish on our part.

I think we've just got to play, and whatever happens, happens. You know, sometimes you just resign yourself that -- it's like the other night against Syracuse, right? If a kid's getting 20, 23, 25 every night, you're not going to go out there and go, Well, she's only going to get six against us. I don't think that's realistic.

So we go out, we play UConn versus USC and see what happens.

Q. Geno, hearing Lindsay talk about being around you, you could tell how much it meant to her and maybe how cool that experience was. Who were the people for you when you were first starting out that I don't know if they told you you were going to go to ten

Final Fours, you would have thought, Wow, that's really cool? Who were those maybe influences?

GENO AURIEMMA: Nobody. There was nobody telling me that we were going to go to ten Final Fours. You know, after my first one, the only question was, How'd you guys get here? Because we didn't belong there. We didn't look like a Final Four team. We didn't come from a Final Four conference. We didn't come from a Final Four part of the world.

We were the first team ever from north of the Mason-Dixon Line, I think. Maybe Cheyney did, but I think in 1991 we were really an outlier, and at that time there was only a handful of schools that really had realistic expectations to be in the Final Four.

However, in my mind and in my coaching staff's mind we came to the realization that if we could get to that Final Four in '91 with the team that we had at that time and taking advantage of the new rules, you know, the three-point line and all that, that if our recruiting got better and we started to attract better players, that we could get ourselves back to the Final Four.

Then four years went by and we didn't. So we thought, all right, that's gone. So now we need to go coach someplace where we have a chance to do that.

Now, it was a different world back then. Yeah, it wasn't until we won in '95 and then in 2000. So I never got, like, a lot of encouragement, yeah, you guys, you're going to be back here a lot. After 2000, 2001, '02, '03, I got a lot of, We're sick of you being here. So I think that was better than a lot of the encouragement.

Q. How do you gauge Paige's hunger level to get you guys back to the Final Four and put you in a position to win a championship?

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't know. I can't gauge any level on her sometimes. Paige is a different star than maybe any that I've ever coached.

She doesn't show it. She doesn't carry it around with her. She doesn't talk about it. Other players that I've had that were of that level, they walked around like they owned it. They talked like they owned it. They played like they owned it.

I think Paige keeps it all inside and lets it come out when it needs to come out, but I know that winning a national championship is really probably the biggest reason why she went to college and played at UConn in the first place, that she wanted an opportunity to do that.

And not that she couldn't do that somewhere else. She just felt like that's the place where I have the best chance to do this. It's not something she talks about every day. It's not something that she discusses with her teammates.

I just think it's there, and hopefully it shows in her game when we're in crunch time.

Q. When you look at both sides of the bracket tomorrow, all the star power we're going to see here and in Albany, just what do you think a day like tomorrow means to women's basketball?

GENO AURIEMMA: I've always thought -- and I hope the portal doesn't screw this up -- but I always thought what was unique about women's basketball, as opposed to men's basketball, was in the new era of men's basketball where players play for one year, and then they have an opportunity to go professionally.

We always had the luxury of players playing on your team for four years, and you could count on, when you got to the Final Four, every team loaded with juniors and seniors that had all been together. I mean, I can remember all those great battles we had with Tennessee, Notre Dame, Stanford even, Georgia.

Teams were loaded with WNBA superstars in the making, and I just hope the portal doesn't screw that up where everybody moves year to year and changes that because tomorrow's a testament really to the young superstars coming up, you know, like Madison Booker and Juju, just to name two.

I'm sure there's others that I'm missing out on. You know, Wiley. There's just so many young, young, young players that are -- hopefully they stay where they are and they grow, grow, grow.

And kids that have hung in there for three or four years and made their mark on their school and on their sport. So I think it can showcase all that's possible if everybody just buys in and hangs in there and grows with their team, but it may be the most fun -- the fun two days, today and tomorrow, that we've had in a long time.

Q. Kind of going off that question, talk about the history of these two programs, USC and UConn. What kind of extra significance do you think it means with these two programs kind of finally matching up in the tournament?

GENO AURIEMMA: When I started coaching in the '70s, you know, when I coached at St. Joseph's with Jim Foster,

I didn't even know who the good players were. Nobody was on television.

I don't even know -- didn't know where the Final Four was, didn't know anything about anything. When I got to UVA in the early '80s, you started to see more of who the national teams were, and they all took turns being great, you know?

Old Dominion was great. Louisiana Tech was great. You know, Tennessee became great. Texas became great. They all kind of took turns.

And then USC exploded onto the scene in a different way, you know, with Cheryl Miller and the McGee twins and all that.

And everybody dropped off, and sometimes when you drop off and you are out of sight, you never come back, you know? Like Old Dominion and Louisiana Tech, for instance. You don't come back, for a variety of reasons.

Sometimes maybe it takes an influx of new coaches, new players, new commitment, and rekindle that fire, you know. Certainly USC has always had the potential to do that, and they've been close sometimes.

But this seems like a different -- this seems like a throwback time to USC, you know? And it's ironic that this is the first time that we're meeting in the Final Four, but it goes to show you how long they've been away from the limelight.

And, yeah, one player, one coach can make a difference. Here they are, and here we are. I wish we could both win, but we can't.

THE MODERATOR: And that concludes our time. Coach, thank you very much.

Joining us now from UConn, student-athletes Paige Bueckers and Aaliyah Edwards.

Q. Paige, this one's for you. I asked Geno how he gauges your hunger to get this team back into position to win a national championship. He said sometimes he can't tell that you don't wear it on -- you know, you don't wear it sort of on your sleeve the way other players that have come through this program have. So I guess my question for you is, how hungry are you to get this team a national championship?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Very hungry. Obviously, everybody on this team is hungry. I know the senior class especially. You come to UConn to win a national championship, so what's the main objective and main goal of the entire four

or five years, however long you're here.

So, I mean, that's the main goal and what we're all focused on.

Q. Paige, you had one of the best freshmen seasons ever in women's college basketball. Juju's having a great season herself. Do you kind of see a little bit of yourself in her?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, just, I mean, this entire freshmen class has been amazing, our freshmen and freshmen around the country and just the way they've come into the college basketball season and have been fearless and contributed right away and are leading the country in a lot of things.

So for her, her confidence, her fearlessness and the ability to just not care that she's a freshman and just perform the way that she does at the level that she does, it's pretty amazing.

Q. I'll just follow up with that. How much time have you and Juju spent together and in what context?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I believe the only time we interacted was at a Nike event, what was that, six or seven months ago before the season started. There was, like, a high school all-star event in New York, and we talked, and we sat courtside at the game next to each other. We just kind of talked basketball and life, and I think that's the only time we really interacted.

Q. Aaliyah, this one's for you. When you picked up your fourth foul, it's really easy to maybe not have the greatest mistake response, but I thought you just did a tremendous job of being a great teammate. Can you speak on that and the importance of having a great mistake response when things might not be going your way?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah. I don't let something that's out of my control control my mood and my emotion and my will to still want our team to win. And even from the bench, you know, that's a mistake that I'll take, and I can't be effective on the bench. So moving forward, can't do that.

Even from the sideline I'm still giving the energy, still helping my teammates. Just knowing that whenever Coach decides to put me back in, just be ready to keep doing what I was still able to do.

Q. Don't know how much of a chance you've gotten to get into the scout thus far against USC, but curious just for either player what you think their size, in

particular, what kind of challenge that's going to be against this kind of shorthanded version of your team?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, they have size at every position, honestly. Their guards are tall. Their posts are tall. So it will be a challenge.

They use their size well. So us just rebounding as a team, defending as a team, trying to make sure we're keeping the posts in when we can and keeping the guards out when we can and just make sure we're contesting everything and making it tough for them on offense, and then trying to attack that size on the offensive end and attack the mismatches there.

But I'm sure we'll get more into it later with the scout. Again, just rebounding as a team and trying to use our smartness rather than what we lack in length and height.

Q. This is for either/or both of you. Everyone's kind of talking about Monday LSU/Iowa, UConn/USC and just kind of the viewership numbers, anticipating kind of records being broken with that. What does it mean to you guys to be able to participate in these moments so critical to the growth of the sport?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I mean, it means a lot to be a part of it because we're part of the cause, helping grow the game, especially women's sports. You know, in terms of viewership, just more people are tuning in. More people are becoming more aware of the talent that we bring to the game.

It's humbling to be a part of that, but I think the biggest thing is we're just going to continue to be dominant, continue to play together, and continue to do what we do and try to win the game because by us just staying poised mentally, that attracts a lot of people to our game and attracts a lot of people who may not have watched or tuned into women's basketball before this year.

Q. Paige, just curious, you talked about, you know, Juju's kind of poise and confidence as a freshman. And when you did sit down and talk with her, you know, when you were in New York for that event, and like you said, talk about life and this and that, what did you get a sense from back then as far as just kind of her mentality entering her freshmen year in college? Did you sense -- I guess just what did you pick up about her, you know, just from that conversation that you guys had?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah. I mean, we talked about her kind of transitioning into college, being a freshman, what that was like for her. Definitely from that conversation, you

can tell she's got a good head on her shoulders. She's humble and hungry, and you could tell from that conversation that she wanted to make an impact right away and put her presence on the college game as a freshman. So you kind of saw that from the conversation.

Q. You guys are the No. 3 seed. USC is the No. 1 team, but UConn has had a much more storied history in the tournament this century than USC has. Do you guys feel like the underdog coming into the game tomorrow?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I mean, I think if you look at our team, you can definitely say that we're the underdogs, but our mindset going into the game is we're going to play like we play each and every game. Execute the game plan. Follow our schemes that we're trying to limit them or trying to play more to our strengths.

I think we just see it as another game. We can't really get too caught up in the rankings or caught up in, like, who's the higher seed, anything like that.

We're just really just going to go in there and play our game, control what we can control, and play the UConn way.

Q. Paige, just wanted to shed some light on you. You do such a tremendous job setting screens and getting in spots to take great shots, and that opens up for other teammates for you to be a playmaker. How would you encourage the next generation to take those type of shots and make those type of plays?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Well, thank you. I would say just impact winning. Just find different ways to contribute. I know a lot of what people watch, especially in the NBA, but it's a lot of ball-dominant players, people who always have the ball in their hands.

I feel like there's not a right or wrong way to play, but just learning how to maybe play with the ball in your hands or maybe play off the ball, and just have variety to your game. It makes you harder to guard and easier to play with.

Just what I've learned, how hard you cut gets other people open. How well you screen, gets other people open. So your teammates will love you if you play selfless, but just, again, just trying to grow your game as much as you can. Make sure that when people are scouting you, there's not one way they can stop you and guard you. So that's what I would say.

Q. Paige, going back to your conversation with Juju, at that time did you offer her advice going into her

freshmen season? You know what those expectations -- you had been in those shoes before. Did you kind of let her know what it would be like, or what was that conversation like?

PAIGE BUECKERS: No, I think we were just going back and forth, just chatting. For her it was, like, first time stepping on campus. So just talking about that and her asking about my recovery and how my knee has been. Just that.

Q. I was curious, you've been asked so many times about the freshmen class. You know, it wasn't that long ago that it was the two of you along with Caitlin and all the other players part of that class, but a lot has happened since then. How long ago does that experience feel now?

PAIGE BUECKERS: It feels like a long, long time ago, especially for me. I feel like it's been a lifetime since I was a freshman and we were playing during COVID times in front of cardboard people. It honestly didn't feel like a real experience, looking back at it.

But, yeah, I would say this freshmen class reminds me a lot of what we came in. Just fearless, confident, and willing and ready to contribute to basketball. But, yeah, I mean, that does feel like a really long time ago now.

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