

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

Monday, April 1, 2024

Portland, Oregon, USA

Moda Center

**UConn Huskies**

**Coach Geno Auriemma**

**Aaliyah Edwards**

**Paige Bueckers**

**Nika Muhl**

Elite 8 Pregame Media Conference

UConn 80, USC 73

THE MODERATOR: Joining us now, UConn, your regional champion.

Coach, congratulations. We'll begin with your opening statement.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you.

I mean, if you watched the game, obviously there's not a whole lot that you didn't see. It was one of the better games that I've been associated with at this level. Two terrific teams. Great competitors playing their hearts out for a dream that each kid has when they go to college.

As I told the players, it doesn't matter whether this is the first time you've ever been to one, like some of the players in our locker room, this is their first time ever for them, or it's for these three where they've experienced this before, there's something about when you reach this particular game and you win this particular game. It may even be more emotional than winning a national championship game sometimes 'cause you know how hard it was to get here.

I'm so proud of them and their sense of belief in themselves never wavered, no matter what happened, no matter who we lost, one after another after another. They never gave up on their dream.

Now here we are.



THE MODERATOR: We'll continue with questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Paige, I asked Coach the other day in the 720 days that you played between NCAA tournament games, how did he make sure your spirit wasn't broken. He gave a thoughtful answer on how you were a light. He said there was one game where he saw you break down at halftime playing Tennessee. Can you take us through what this has been like mentally and emotionally, when the clock hit zero, what that was like again tonight?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, last year was -- the last couple years have been really challenging on my mental, of me finding joy outside of the game, finding joy in the process, finding joy in trials and tribulations.

I feel like I've had adversity thrown my way, but at the same time I'm super blessed. I got surgery for free, I got rehab for free. I'm surrounded by the best teammates, best coaching staff. So many people have helped me get to where I'm at today.

Looking at the positives in life, what I do have, instead of focusing on what I don't. Again, trying to be the best teammate I can be. It could be easy for me to sulk and be upset and just be sad about what life has thrown me this past couple years, or I could attack it with the mentality of being a leader, still being in the gym smiling, motivating people, being a leader in how I worked.

I know people saw me in the gym every single day, whether it be Pilates, rehab, in the weight room, Mahooti, stuff like that. So that's motivating for other people to see, as well.

Just today was one of the most rewarding feelings I've ever felt in my life, just seeing where I was a year ago, today, doing individual workouts, starting to feel the basketball again, get the ball in my hands again and play. Now I'm here with my teammates and coaching staff and going to the Final Four.



It's been a very rewarding journey. I'm super, super grateful for it all. The tough times made me who I am. It's built my faith. It's built my appreciation for life and gratitude for anything that gets thrown my way.

**Q. Nika and Aaliyah, you've been part of celebrations like these before. That looked a little bit different than the other two. Can you explain why and what it felt like to go through that.**

NIKA MUHL: Yeah, I mean, obviously celebration comes with a different story, a different set of challenges that year, different people, different relationships.

This, as Paige said, has been probably the most rewarding one. It felt different. I would say this group is very special. We overcame so much and learned from it, not just overcame it.

Although a lot of people didn't believe we were ever going to do this, we did. Don't get me wrong, we don't really care what other people think. At the same time it feels really, really good to prove those people wrong.

I feel like that's one part of why it feels so different.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah, just to piggyback on what Nika said, it's a great feeling. It's just a great feeling. I think going off what Nika said, we've been through so much this year, last year. I think we really had to work hard for this win, and work hard for how far we've come.

Obviously you guys see us, what we do on the court, but it's really behind the scenes that we're really, like, grinding it out. We had to go through a lot. We went through a lot together.

To be here together and to look back on how far we've come, that's really the biggest, rewarding part about all this.

**Q. Nika and Aaliyah, Paige knows she's coming back. You guys know you're not. How did that inform the way you thought about this game and the way you played? Nika, you played with four fouls for quite a long time, and you didn't come out. How was that?**

NIKA MUHL: Yeah, I mean, I'm sure Aaliyah and I felt much different. I'm sure she felt the same way as me. I would say Paige felt the same way even though she's coming back. She felt that way because of us.

We're ride or dies here. She knows if she doesn't bring it, we're not going to get another chance, me and Aaliyah. I'm sure Paige felt the same way.

It's different when you know every game might be your last. You put a lot more into it. You go 100%. There's absolutely not one reason why you wouldn't.

I'm so proud of our team and the way we handled it. We all just ride for each other.

To answer your question about the fouls... Yeah, uhm, I told myself that I'm not going to foul out this game, but I didn't say that I'm not going to get four fouls, so...

Coach in free rounds today was on me a lot today about fouling. I kind of took that personal. I was like, There's no way I'm going to do that to my team and to myself again. Yeah, happy with how it turned out.

**Q. Nika, you were out there for 13 minutes with the four fouls. Just the toughness that you had to have today, the whole team's toughness was kind of amazing. Can you speak to that?**

NIKA MUHL: Yeah, of course, Coach is always on us. We already know we have a short bench. That never has been an excuse for us, never has been, never will be.

One thing about it, when we have a short bench, everybody needs to step up. Nobody needs to be great. He said everybody just needs to be solid and do what they're best at. This is a game today where everybody literally did what they're best at. I'm so, so proud of people coming off the bench.

Q and Ice, I'm so proud of our freshmen, our underclassmen, the way they stepped up. It's not easy. This is your first time in this environment. You've never been a part of it. You don't know what it feels like.

They played like they were in that environment before. I'm so happy and proud of them. Just super, super excited for our team.

**Q. Paige, in 2021 you won 11 major awards. You were the freshman that everybody was watching. Now JuJu is the one everybody is watching. Her team didn't make it to the Final Four. What advice would you give her to use that as motivation?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I think success is a process. It's tough, especially as a freshman to be leading your team like that, have no experience in this sort of environment, on this stage, and lead your team. You feel a lot of pressure.

But for her to have the year she had as a freshman,



fearless, confident, one of the best players in the country, she's got a lot to build on. I know getting here, feeling this loss, we've been a part of it, it's very motivating. It lets you build experience on how to be better, how to learn from it.

So just take the good, continue to build on that, and focus on what you need to work on and do that, too.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Not done yet, baby (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: The floor is open to questions for Coach Auriemma.

**Q. You've talked a lot about what it means to be coaching at this stage of your life. Was there anything more meaningful than watching your players celebrate on the floor tonight?**

GENO AURIEMMA: No, no, there isn't. I mean, you're always trying to do as much as you can to help them achieve certain goals that they have. You're there with them every day. You see how hard they work.

They buy into the things that we preach every day about what's important and how to play this game, what it means to play together.

Like a lot of the coaches, we're trying to teach them more than just about winning. But when they do win and they do accomplish something that's really difficult to accomplish, you get excited for them. You feel their excitement. Even though you probably don't have it in you to feel that way, because I'm tired. It's excruciating going through this process, watching the ups and downs of their emotions, how they feel.

When it all comes together, it's just a beautiful thing. I was really taken aback by the celebration. That was pretty cool. You can tell it still means a lot, you know?

We did it 3,000 miles from home. God forbid. No one ever thought we could win a game outside of Storrs, Connecticut. I'm glad we were able to win one out here.

**Q. Do you feel with everything that you've gone through, everything that's happened, to get here, you yourself said it might take a miracle for you guys to do this, do you feel this is your best coaching job at UConn, that you did conjure up the miracle here?**

GENO AURIEMMA: There are times when you know that you've maxed out the abilities of your players. I'm very realistic person. I don't try to put unrealistic expectations

on players.

When I watched them after what's happened, I did think it would take a miracle. Yesterday was Easter. Easter is a celebration of miracles, right? And today is April Fool's Day. It's either a miracle or a cruel joke.

But we'll get there next week and find out if it's real.

I think our entire coaching staff probably worked harder at keeping it together, not so much what offense, what defense, all that other stuff, just keeping the whole thing together, not letting us kind of get frayed by all the things that have happened.

I talked to Lindsay before the game. We were just talking about how difficult it is to coach in a circumstance like that.

Yeah, I think our coaching staff had to deal with an enormous amount of things this year that we never had to deal with before. I'm really, really proud of our stuff.

Our president, she was here. She's not here anymore. She's headed for an airplane. But I hope that she reads the greatest coaching job ever done in the history of women's basketball (laughter).

**Q. The game that Paige had tonight, what she took on defensively, offensively, what impressed you the most? Was this just what you've seen from her?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Paige being Paige?

**Q. Yes.**

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, Paige always wants to be superhuman. You can't aspire to be that, but she tries her damndest to be superhuman.

Today she was playing against somebody who plays like they're superhuman. I think that was probably the toughest matchup that any of those guards had throughout the entire season - maybe since they've gotten to Connecticut. I think JuJu is probably as difficult a matchup as there is, or has been, for our players.

But for Paige, this is what I live for. I live for these moments. I think she almost looks at it as they have to guard me, too. I'm a tough matchup for them. She always tries to make it our team against their team. But I do know that she's pretty proud full. She was pointing to her 10 rebounds. I pointed to JuJu's 10 rebounds. She had an excuse why JuJu got 10 or why she didn't get 15. She said she was busy locking up somebody, she didn't get 15.



When you have players that think like there's nothing I can't do, there's nothing that escapes me, they're just on another level. They play the game on another level. They think on a different level. They inspire everybody around them.

So, yeah, today was Paige doing Paige things.

**Q. What is your impression of this moment for women's basketball? Two exciting matchups tonight. The star power, attention being paid to the games.**

GENO AURIEMMA: I didn't get to see the first game. Everybody was following it, for sure. When I saw the halftime score was 45-45, I actually thought, Man, I wish I was there. I really want to see what's going on over there. Those people must be in for a real treat right now.

You don't want to overdramatize it, but for the longest time it was if someone had these kinds of moments like these kids are having right now, they were either compared automatically to men's basketball, and always came up wanting, or they were, Wow, look at that, like there's actually a female athlete that can do that.

It never garnered the respect factor. It was always an incredulous factor. I can't believe, she plays like a guy.

But now it's for real. Now they're being appreciated for their incredible talents, the show that they put on, the excitement that they create on the court, the excitement that the fans feel. And God bless 'em. They've done it. It's almost like they've made everybody come to the 20th century, so to speak, and finally catch on with what these people are capable of doing.

It's pretty remarkable. Next weekend should be just as much fun as this weekend. Yeah, I hope Caitlin Clark had a personal agenda against LSU. I know there's nothing personal between me and her. I don't need to be seeing her drop 50 on us next weekend, you know?

I love her. I think she's the best player. Forget I ever said Paige is the best player in the country. I think she's the best player of all time. I don't know whoever said that I said that Paige is the best player in the country.

**Q. Against that backdrop that women's college basketball is having its moment, how concerning is it like the missteps like the three-point line in Portland? I want to get your thoughts. Do you think it takes away from the big picture that women's basketball is having this moment?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Maybe these things are happening

often at other places, other things. But the attention generated now on the sport is such that things like this are blown up. Maybe this was happening 10 years ago and nobody paid any attention to it. Maybe nobody was even smart enough to notice or pay attention.

It certainly doesn't take away from the performance of these kids and what they did. Sometimes things grow so fast and they explode so quickly that we hurry up and we miss a step.

I always like to look at it as, I don't think anybody in the NCAA committee said, Yeah, I know it's a mistake, but nobody's going to notice it so we'll let it go.

It was an honest mistake. Things happen. Let's move on. The games were the games. The kids were fantastic. Tomorrow, the next day this will all be ancient history.

**Q. Keeping Nika in the game with four fouls for that length of time. By necessity? Or was that a trust thing with you and your senior?**

GENO AURIEMMA: The word 'trust' doesn't exist between me and Nika. KK had four fouls and Nika had four fouls. There did cross my mind, I know she's going to foul out and I'm going to have to put KK in an impossible situation as a freshman. I just crossed my fingers and prayed.

Because she did do that in shootaround today. She did something stupid and fouled somebody and I lost my mind. She goes, I won't do that tonight.

I said, Yes, you will. I've seen it over four years, over 9700 games. Of course, you're going to do it tonight.

And she did it. I think for the first time, there was a point where she was scared. Like, I can't screw around anymore. She learned her lesson from the Notre Dame game this year when she fouled out.

Did I trust she would be able to do it? No, but I prayed.

**Q. What skills, basketball skills, leadership skills, Paige has that puts her on the Mount Rushmore of UConn women's basketball?**

GENO AURIEMMA: She's a selfless human being. That automatically separates her from a whole bunch of other people. She takes care of her teammates better than anyone I've ever seen. Maybe there's been others, of course. But the way she shares all her good fortune, all the good things that come to her, really don't mean anything to her unless she can share them with her teammates, whatever it is.



That part, as a person, the part where the biggest moments, she's not afraid, and she comes through in those biggest moments.

I know, I know, because every kid has this, I know that there's a fear of, What if I can't? Anybody that tells you there's not, they're lying, okay?

But the great ones, you know, they put that in the back of their mind and they just go and they do what they do.

We've had some great ones on that Mount Rushmore. I don't know that we could fit 'em all, you know? But yeah, all she needs is to win a national championship. Hopefully we'll have an opportunity to do that next weekend.

**Q. For your freshmen to make the impact that they did, in some ways looked so unfazed, would you have ever have imagined they could have done that, even Q who hadn't played since the first round?**

GENO AURIEMMA: There's something about all of them that makes you want to believe in them. A lot of times, freshmen are on the bench because maybe you don't need them that much. You really have a pretty good team. You want to bring them along slowly. I've had freshmen that you couldn't sit on the bench even one time, right? Every practice, every game, they played for the whole four years. Some are just like that. Some need to come along slowly. Some you have no idea what they have until you throw them out there, and it's sink or swim.

I think that's what happened to these freshmen. They were just thrown in a situation where they didn't expect to be in, but once they were in it, they thrived in it.

Q's unbelievable. Q told the coaches today, Hey, I think my shot's back. I'm ready to go.

I never think Q is ever not ready to play or she's not a gamer. She's a tough, tough competitor.

Ash is Ash. When she's got it going, she's got it going. When she's struggling, she's struggling. But as a group...

And Ice, if I didn't have to play Ice, I probably wouldn't have played her today because there's things that Ice does during the week or leading up to games that makes you think she doesn't believe that she can be effective in the next game that we're playing. She makes you think, I can't do this.

But then when you put her out there, you say, Listen, you have no choice, I don't care what you think, then she goes

out and plays really, really well, so...

Like I said, I pray a lot.

**Q. When USC tied the game in the fourth quarter, you take a timeout. Was that a matter of adjustments or trying to settle your team down? How did you see them respond?**

GENO AURIEMMA: I think a little bit of both. They play so many minutes that any chance that I get that I can give them a breather, I want to do that.

Then I wanted to make sure that we got the right shot by the right person. We would come out of the timeout, take the lead, settle things back down again.

Last thing we wanted was not call a timeout, they take the lead, now we're in a little bit of a rush or a little bit of a panic situation. I don't know.

They needed a breather. We needed to adjust who's going to score. We needed to make an adjustment on how we were going to guard certain things. We took off from there.

**Q. Obviously Portland is going to be hosting the Final Four in 2030, Moda Center. Curious if you have any overall thoughts of Portland hosting this event, three-point line aside?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, well, I won't notice it. I'll be watching it on TV. I'm sure it will be a great event. I'll be sitting there with my grandkids going, I was there, I coached in that building. It's really cool.

I think that the fans that have come out have proven that they can host events here. I think this part of the country is kind of basketball crazed to a certain extent. There's not been enough opportunities up here to have those events, so I'm happy that there are.

I think the city with only four teams here in the Final Four, I think people will get a better sense. With eight teams, it's kind of a mess, to be honest with you. You get 30 minutes on the court because the other seven teams... It's totally stupid.

But with four teams here, I'm sure they'll put on a great show. No question.

**Q. You and JuJu Watkins had a moment postgame, I'm curious what was said or words of advice or encouragement you offered her?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Go pro. I told her, I said, It's a great

opportunity for you and WNBA, overseas, three-on-three league. I'm sure there's great places for you to play. I love Lindsay, but you got bigger fish to fry.

She was very emotional. She was crying, like all competitors. She put her heart and soul into this. I just reminded her, You had an amazing year. Your team wouldn't be here without you.

THE MODERATOR: That will be the end of our time. Coach, thank you very much. Congratulations.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you, everybody.

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