

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Semifinal - North Carolina vs UConn

Thursday, March 26, 2026

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

UConn Huskies

Geno Auriemma

Sarah Strong

Azzi Fudd

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to today's press conference featuring UConn Huskies Head Coach Geno Auriemma. We'll begin with an opening statement.

GENO AURIEMMA: There's not really a lot to say other than, you know, you play, what, 36 games, and you try to put yourself in this situation as often as you can. You know you're going to play a really good team. Just looking at my players, I think they're really excited about playing. It's our first time here in Fort Worth. The arena is great.

I'm sure the fans will be great. I think every team that's here knows that this weekend is probably the biggest weekend of the year. I know everybody talks about the Final Four and all that, but getting there is a lot harder than what happens after you get there, I think.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Geno, you guys routinely either lead the country in assists or in the top 5. Is there a common thread among all those teams that makes you such a great passing team and an assist team, and is there something that makes this team stand out to the point where it could break your record?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think a lot of it has to do with the philosophy that we have that's been in place since I first started coaching. Our '88/'89 team went to the Final Four. I'm sorry, our '90/'91 team went to the Final Four, and we have been playing a five-out kind of game where it all relied on passing and moving without the ball.



So that's been our way of playing for as long as I can remember. When we're out recruiting, we're trying to recruit kids that can pass, want to pass, and we spend a lot of time working on it. Some years it's better than others. This year I think it's worked out pretty well.

It's always better when you've got a couple of big kids that can pass like we do. So I think it's just our philosophy. You know, we don't play a lot of one-on-one basketball, although we do, but that's not who we are. I think it's reflected in the stats.

Q. This is a general college sports question for you. Do you think women's sports in its growth, in its evolution, and its expansion is in place now where it can go on its own without Title IX legislation?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, it appears to me that at the big conferences level, I think Title IX legislation is probably over. I don't know that when you say we're allocating \$20.5 million that they're going, yeah, well, you know, women's basketball is going to get the same amount as football and men's basketball.

I think that Title IX legislation over the last couple of years is pretty much out the window. I'm sure there's some schools that are trying really hard to stay with that in terms of numbers, you know, scholarship opportunities for people, but when it comes time for funding and putting money into those programs that would make you believe that it's the same, I don't see that as much anymore as I did in the beginning.

I think most of the NCAA laws have gone out the window as the conferences have kind of consolidated the power that they have over the NCAA for the most part. And the way the women's game has grown, it's grown at a lot of places, and those places where it's grown have got to keep pushing for more, because I don't know that we're quite there yet.

Like, for instance, people talk about playing at neutral sites in the first and second round. My question would be, why? Baseball doesn't do it. Even football doesn't do it now. No



other school -- no other team on campus -- maybe, I don't know, there might be one or two sports on campus plays in neutral courts, neutral sites in the first round, second round of the NCAA Tournament.

Maybe there are people. I don't know. Because I don't think we're there yet. Maybe we will be. Maybe if the first and second rounds were always held at the same places, maybe. So we still got a ways to go. Unfortunately, it's going to have to be done through the way the conference commissioners and the way the select directors decide that they want to keep funding this sport. That's the only way.

Q. In your two years of working with Sarah Strong so far what have you learned about the most effective way to coach her and what she responds to the best?

GENO AURIEMMA: Like most really, really good players, they want to be left alone for the most part. Just let me play. Then they really like when you get after them. When you leave them alone and then they don't do what you want them to do, then you can really get after them, and she loves that.

Like, she loves -- like all the good players I've had, she really enjoys being coached. She's not one of these kids that hangs their head ever. She's very competitive and has tremendous pride. It's somewhat different for me. It's kind of refreshing.

We had dinner with Paige last night and listened to her speak. It reminded me of how much those five years took off of my life listening to the things that she says, and the interesting thing is I lived through it with Diana and they're the only two that put me through that.

Sarah, Sarah thinks the same things. She just doesn't say them. We catch her every once in a while saying under her breath. So right now I'm kind of enjoying this phase. Junior year, senior year, might not be the same, but she enjoys being coached, she enjoys being right. She's just like every other great player I've ever coached.

Q. Looked like Morgan Cheli was a participant in practice today. Can you confirm when she was cleared and what's taken her so long in her journey to get back? I think in January you expected her not to be available the rest of the year.

GENO AURIEMMA: She's not available, so I wasn't wrong. She's just able to do some -- a little bit more workouts. That's part of her rehab. And why? That's a doctor question; not for me.

It's just taken a lot longer than we anticipated. Yeah, that's

the best I can tell you.

Q. As a follow-up on the previous question, how have you seen the NCAA Tournament specifically change in the past five or so years?

GENO AURIEMMA: Have I seen a change? Well, we never had to do media at 7:30 in the morning. We never had to have shoot-around at 5:30 in the morning. We never had to have a half an hour on the court. The players used to be the main thing back in the day, and now that's all changed.

The idea of having -- that the committee has to run a tournament with eight teams in one site and try to get all eight of them to actually prepare for the biggest games, it just makes no sense at all.

And the game is growing. As we talked, the game is exploding. The game has changed so much. Yet, half the country doesn't have an ability to go drive to a game and watch a game in person.

So, yeah, it's changed. Some of it in terms of the media attention, the way the TV networks have decided to broadcast way more games, the way the media -- how they're covering the games, the level of interest in the NCAA Tournament.

But there are still things that I think as we experience these growing pains are going to have to be kind of re-evaluated and go back to what makes the most sense to get our players, everybody's players, feeling like it's about them still.

Again, in an era where financially you have to make everything work, that seems to be the No. 1 question or the No. 1 concern that everyone has: How do we make this work financially? I'm okay with that. How do we do that and still make it work for the players as well?

Q. You mentioned you didn't think the game was there yet for neutral sites in the first and second round. Felisha made comments after the game the other night that kind of went viral and once again sparked that conversation. What did you think of what she had to say after the game obviously against you guys?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I didn't take it as she doesn't want neutral sites. She doesn't want our site, right? She's upset about being in the Connecticut site that many times over the course of how many years.

I understand where she's coming from, you know. I've not been on any of those committees, but you keep falling in



the 8/9 game, 7/8/9 game, you're going to end up getting a 1 or 2 seed most of the time. Why you keep getting the same? That's a question that I don't have the answer to.

If you would tell me that we could guarantee that every first and second round game no matter where we played it would be sold out, then I would say let's do it, but the reality is they wouldn't be unless you have them at certain places. Then people would complain that so and so gets an unfair advantage by being close to home.

Like, Albany used to bid on the regionals all the time, and because we were the No. 1 seed so many times, we were sent to Albany. People would go, that's not fair. Well, it is fair, because they're following the process.

So there is no true how to do it, but again, I would say if you're just going to have neutral sites just to have neutral sites, again, I would point to every other sport on campus doesn't do that except men's basketball, but that's because they can.

So I don't have the solution to that at all. Although I do think, though, that there are places in the country that would support those first two round games provided there were local teams involved, because that seems to be the way it goes. But we're here now where every regional is a sell-out. That didn't used to exist in the past.

I think first order of business is spread the regionals to four regions. Otherwise, don't call them regionals anymore. Call them destinations. The word "regional" means you're in regions of the country. So I would like to go back to that before we go back to the other thing.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

GENO AURIEMMA: But if you answer every question with real long answers, you don't have to answer as many of them, so I apologize. I won't do it next time.

THE MODERATOR: Our student-athletes joining us today are Sarah Strong and Azzi Fudd. We'll open it up to questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Sarah, Coach Banghart was very complimentary of you throughout the recruiting process and talked about how much her kids even were looking forward to seeing you last year when you came back. Can you just talk about the process for you, how often you were there at North Carolina and how close you might have come to staying at home?

SARAH STRONG: Yeah, I was really -- no, I'm kidding. It was definitely a tough decision. I love Courtney. I love

UNC. Just, yeah, every time I visited, she's made me feel so welcome. I think she's a great coach. I have a lot of respect for her and very excited to be playing against them tomorrow.

Q. Azzi, in a generation where the transfer portal has been so prominent, can you talk about your reasoning for staying at UConn for so long?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah. I mean, I'm super big on loyalty and the relationships I build, and I knew whatever decision I made coming to college, that was going to be the place I wanted to call home, so I wanted to make sure I made the right one.

I mean, staying all five years, it's why I think what Caroline and I have done to spend all five years here together is rare. It's special. Then just also what the coach has been able to build here in this program, you don't see people transfer too often. I think that just goes -- that plays a part into why our chemistry is so special and why our bond is so strong.

Like, you spend all this time here together. We live together. We spend basically every minute of every day together. So to be able to go through, like, you've got the portal, you've got all these outside voices, but to be able to stick together and stay strong is super special in this day and age.

Q. What are the biggest things for your team going into this match-up tomorrow?

SARAH STRONG: I would say just to play our type of game. Not let them get us out of rhythm. Just playing UConn basketball for 40 minutes.

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I completely agree with that. I think UNC is also a really talented team, so being able to stop their transition game, be physical, crash the boards, but I think, yeah, transition game is going to be really important tomorrow.

Q. Azzi, you talked a little bit about just the camaraderie on this team. It sounded like a kind of wild end to practice. Just how much fun are you guys having right now? What's the team kind of vibe going into Sweet 16?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I think the team vibe is excited. Like you said, you could hear the energy out there on the court. Going however many days in between games, it gives you time to prepare, but also it just makes you hungry, excited to play.



This is the longest break we've had all season, besides right before this, but -- I lost my train of thought. Oh, yeah. I feel like for me making sure that people are having fun, and it's so easy to get caught up in the pressure of the tournament and, you know, you lose, you go home and Sweet 16 and all this and rah, rah, whatever. But making sure at the end of the day if we take care of what we need to, you play UConn basketball, stay locked in together, play harder than anyone else, then all those pressures don't matter.

Q. Azzi, could you imagine what tomorrow's game would be like if Sarah had gone to North Carolina and you were playing against her? Then, secondly, what is it that makes this team so special in terms of passing the ball? I mean, you could break the national record for assists tomorrow actually as a team.

AZZI FUDD: Oh, wow. Well, first of all, I mean, I would probably lock Sarah up, so it wouldn't be that much of a difference if she was on the other team. It would be kind of fun, though, yeah. Yeah, she wouldn't score. She might get a couple of rebounds. I struggle boxing out at times.

But I think you can tell by watching our team just how unselfish we are and how the biggest goal is to win. Doesn't matter who has the most points, who has the most rebounds, what the stat lines look like. The No. 1 priority is to help the team succeed in any way possible.

I feel like we're unselfish to a fault sometimes. Someone will have a shot. We'll pass it for another shot, and then we'll pass it for another shot. Then all of a sudden we passed it five shots, and we turned the ball over. That's something that we're eliminating, but that would be -- I mean, what is the record for assists?

Q. (Off microphone).

AZZI FUDD: Oh, wow. Oh, wow. Wait, that's really cool.

Q. You were talking about the personal relationship you have with Courtney and her family. Is there a part of you in some ways why do we have to face them, why couldn't we face somebody else? Is there any of that in your system?

SARAH STRONG: Not really. It is what it is. It's March, and I'm ready to play whoever, so you know...

Q. Just to give you a chance to respond, would Azzi indeed lock you up?

AZZI FUDD: She doesn't need to respond. She doesn't need to respond.

SARAH STRONG: Was that for me or for her?

Q. Yeah.

SARAH STRONG: I'm going to let her be great. I'm going to keep her confidence high for tomorrow, because -- yeah, I'm just going to let her be great. I'm just not going to answer.

AZZI FUDD: It's a good thing I won't be out there guarding you tomorrow, so you can be great tomorrow, too.

SARAH STRONG: Thank you.

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