

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 1 Final - Notre Dame vs UConn

Sunday, March 29, 2026

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Dickies Arena

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Azzi Fudd

Sarah Strong

Blanca Quinonez

Elite 8 Postgame Media Conference

UConn 70, Notre Dame 52

THE MODERATOR: We have head Coach Geno Auriemma and our student-athletes Blanca Quinonez, Sarah Strong, and Azzi Fudd. We'll begin with an opening statement for Coach.

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't know that there's a perfect answer or a perfect way, but it's always really hard. I've said this for countless years. It's always the hardest game there is to play. It's so hard to get to the Final Four. You always have to beat a really, really good team at this stage of the game, and certainly, you know, we played a really, really good team.

But I'm really proud of our players and how we managed to flip the switch a little bit each game, you know be, come out in the second half and take what we learned the first half. We did that today. Really, really proud of my players. Most of them. Most of them. I mean, you included. Either most or not most. I appreciate you.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Coach on the floor said that he doesn't think he's ever been prouder to take a team to the Final Four right here. You have a lot of competition in that area. What does it mean to hear him say that?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, that means a lot. I mean, he doesn't say anything he doesn't mean. He doesn't give out compliments too often, depending on who you are. So to



hear him say that it does mean a lot, and we feel the same way. We love this team so much, so it does mean the world to go to the Final Four with everyone.

SARAH STRONG: Pretty much what Azzi said. He doesn't really give those nice words to us often, but we know secretly deep down he really loves us and cares for us and wants the best for us, so it really means a lot.

BLANCA QUINONEZ: He, of course, didn't say that to me, so I'm really happy for that, but we have a lot of work to do to get ready for the Final Four.

GENO AURIEMMA: Me and you have a lot of work to do between the two of us too.

BLANCA QUINONEZ: Yeah, for sure.

Q. This question is actually for all three of you. How did it feel to see Geno in the cowboy hat dancing with KK hyping him up?

BLANCA QUINONEZ: It was fun, you know, to see him smile because he don't used to do that, especially with me. It was really fun, I think see him happy make us happy, so...

SARAH STRONG: Yes, again, seeing him excited and kind of goofy is really good for us, because I don't know, he's not usually like that. He's usually all serious or like anxious, grumpy. Just seeing him let loose and be his true self was really good.

AZZI FUDD: I thought that the cowboy hat looked pretty good on him. It looked pretty natural. When you know -- when he breaks out a dance move, that's how you know he's proud you, he's happy, so it was good to see.

Q. Sarah, I think we've known all season long the depth of this team was one of their strengths, was one of your strengths. I think you had almost half the points this afternoon from the bench, including really great afternoon from Blanca, where can you just talk about that aspect of the team and how important that is at this time of the year?



SARAH STRONG: Yeah, it's super important. I feel like no other team has a bench like us. We can have kind of anyone off the bench step up and change the whole pace of the game. I mean, yeah, Jana, Blanca, Heckel did a great job coming in playing their roles with rebounds; Blanca with a little bit of everything. Heckel with defense, I feel like that's what they do, and very happy to have them.

Q. Sarah, I think that when you looked at your guys' game plan against Hannah, they asked you to be out on an island against her a whole lot. They asked for a lot of switching. What was it that you guys did that was able to kind of make her life a little difficult?

SARAH STRONG: Yeah. We saw last game she got a lot of shots up, so we wanted to limit her touches and not let her get into her rhythm and kind of get her team going.

Again, our point guards were guarding them, but we were in the help in the gap, so just not letting her do whatever she wanted to do.

Q. Azzi, you've been on so many different teams and been through so much within the program. From the outside looking at this season, it's hard to pinpoint moments of adversity from the outside, but from your point of view, what were moments of adversity during the season? I know it can't have been as easy as it looks to get to this point.

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, and I think the coaches put us in a great position, set us up for games like this, games like we had on Friday in practice, every single practice with the practice guys, with them yelling at us. Whatever it may be, throwing different things at us, just making us prepared, getting our minds right for everything that might -- we might see come tournament time.

So I think games like this we started a little shaky, but we can be confident knowing that we've been prepared. Our coaches -- what we've done the last 35, however many games, was all in preparation for moments like this. So when it comes down to it, we have full confidence in ourselves, in each other. We know the coaches feel the same, so I think just the adversity that the coaches throw at us and prepare us through in practice.

Q. For Sarah and Azzi, you guys won the championship last year. You've gotten to this point. What does it mean to be back here and have a chance to win another championship, and what feels different this year from last year?

SARAH STRONG: I mean, yeah, I'm super proud of this

team. It means a lot to be here. Not a lot of teams obviously get here, but I feel like personally I'm excited for whatever games we have, the next practices we have, and enjoy the seniors, the time we have left with them.

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I mean, we don't take it lightly getting to the Final Four. Obviously like Blanca said earlier, we still have work we need to do, things to clean up going forward. We're definitely going to enjoy this and appreciate just what we've done so far this season and then get to work.

It means a lot.

Q. Blanca, Coach has been to 25 Final Fours with this program. This will be his 25th. This is your first. What does it mean to you to be part of what UConn has created for well before you even were born?

BLANCA QUINONEZ: I'm just happy. I'm just grateful to be here. Share this Final Four with this team and my teammates is something special. We really work hard during the season. I think we were being up and downs, but I'm just really excited for and grateful.

Q. Blanca, what were you seeing in that first quarter? It just seemed like you were kind of getting separation. You were kind of hitting everything that you put up. And you kind of really kind of helped you guys stay up in that. What were you looking at? What were you seeing?

BLANCA QUINONEZ: As always, I just try to bring something to the court, impact the game, as Coach says. And I think everyone was locked in and I think everybody was ready to play that game. I just go there and just try to do the best for the team.

THE MODERATOR: Congratulations, ladies. We'll now take questions for Coach Auriemma.

Q. You said outside the already the other day that the great ones tend to step up and lead in late-game pressure situations, and you immediately said that Sarah would be the one to step up and lead. Did you see that from her in any capacity today?

GENO AURIEMMA: Oh, yeah, of course. Whatever happens on game day, whatever happens in a game like today has already happened a lot during the course of the season. There's nothing that happened today that would make you go I've never seen that before.

Watching Sarah in practice every day and the games that we've played find a level of leadership that sometimes

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

shows itself in how many points she scored, how many rebounds she's gotten, but other ways, in huddles, during time-outs what she has to say.

So because I've seen it all year long, I would expect to see it, especially in a game like today.

As you can tell, that's not her natural disposition, you know, but she knows that when it's time to win games, that she has a huge responsibility. Some players shy away from it, and she likes it.

Q. This morning Coach Schaefer mentioned the 2016 UConn team with Breonna and Napheesa as the most dominant team in women's basketball history. When you look at what this team is doing right now, do you see any similarities between the two teams, or is this a group that's building their own sort of path?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it's so, so much different. That 2016 team was a very, very mature -- you know, Moriyah Jefferson, Morgan Tuck, and still we were all seniors. I think this team -- somebody asked what's the difference between this team and last year's team. We're a much younger team. You know, when we took away Paige and took away Kaitlyn Chen, you know, two fifth-year seniors, and we replaced them with freshmen pretty much.

So this is a very young team doing it in a completely different way, and that team did it. I don't know that there will ever be a team that had that many pros and that was that explosive. Gabby was on that team. I mean, it was -- yeah, this isn't that team, but they find their own way to get the same things done.

Q. Kayleigh Heckel, big game today on a really hard assignment. How has her steadiness and decision-making helped?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, Kayleigh coming in, she played in this game last year against us at USC, you know. So I think she had a sense, but I think the pressure your first time out is great playing at UConn in this environment, but she gives us a little bigger version of KK, you know? She's fearless, like KK is.

Both of them had very difficult assignments trying to guard I think probably the best point guard in the country, I think, and I think she's, as we've gone along in this tournament, become even more comfortable and more sure of herself. She's a very emotional kid. When she's playing well, she really feeds off of that.

I'm happy she got to show some of the things that she's learned.

Q. Forgive me for a little bit of a philosophical question, but have you noticed all of your best teams somewhat take on the personality of their best player? Is that why this team -- at least from the outside this team seems pretty calm because Sarah is pretty calm or at least that's the outside view of it.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, yeah, Michael, I think that's true to a certain extent. It is. And that's why Friday and today when we were rushing around like crazy on offense, it was so not us. You know, it was atypical of us. That's not who we are.

We really don't generally play with that kind of, you know, chaotic, because we are calm. But at the same time, there is a level of confidence that Sarah has that I think she lifts them up to someplace where they wouldn't be able to be by themselves or with maybe somebody different.

So they play with confidence knowing they have her, and that's probably the best compliment that I can give her, give Sarah.

Q. You mentioned Hannah I'm presuming as one of the best point guards in the country in your view.

GENO AURIEMMA: Not one of the best. I think she is the best, yeah.

Q. What does a player with that grit for all 40 minutes do for the game of women agency basketball?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, for people that are not familiar with South Jersey, that's just Philadelphia East, right? So she's got a little bit of that toughness and grit, like you said, and talent. It's rare. It's rare that you find a player that is involved in every single play to the point where, like, you have to -- whoever she's guarding, you have to go hide them someplace hoping that she's not involved in that play, and she still manages to be involved in the play somehow some way.

Not only offensively can she get wherever she wants to go, get any shot she wants, but defensively she probably causes more problems for your offense than any player in the country.

I mean, you can deal with a shot blocker. You can deal with that, but you cannot deal with someone that every time you're dribbling the ball, you're more worried about where she is than who you are passing it to. I just love watching her. I asked her after the game if she was old enough to go pro, and she said, no, I want one more shot at you guys.

Q. You mentioned obviously that 2016 team. This is the team in women's college basketball with the highest point differential since that team. You mentioned how young it is. I'm curious, what is kind of the special sauce with this particular team and especially on the defensive side of the ball how have you guys managed to have this level of success?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, some teams that we've had that were really, really good defensively we had to be good from the 3-point line and in, because we just didn't have the players the last four years -- before last year -- well, even including last year. We didn't have enough players to be able to extend our defense as much as we can right now, okay?

So defensively this team can do more because we do have more players, and we started the season the very first day with that kind of aggressive mindset. It fits how they want to play. That's kind of what they want to do. We've had teams in the past that could do that as well. Maya Moore's team especially, thinking back to those days.

But because it hasn't been apparent, what, 2020, '22, '23, '24 -- I mean, a lot of years where we could just barely contain people half court. This team is able to extend its defense because we have more players that want to play like that, and we can afford to go that hard because we can bring somebody off the bench that can continue that kind of pressure.

Q. Going back to that comment about being the most proud of this team, I was wondering if you could elaborate on that a little bit? Also, back to the adversity and what adversity you've seen them overcome?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, you know, everybody knows today's kids, right? So whether you believe it or not, when you say I'm really proud of you, they go, oh, Coach loves us. Sometimes you got to say stuff even if you don't believe it, but I actually do believe what I said. I am really proud of them because getting all the way to this point undefeated is a lot of baggage to carry, right?

I mean, every day somebody is coming after you to break your streak or to, you know -- you have to carry that we're undefeated. So I'm really proud of the way they've handled all this and how they don't let it bother them. They don't get caught up in anything other than what do we have to do today?

As far as adversity goes, I would say the adversity is me, right? Every day for five months they have to put up with

me, so I try to be for them all the things that can happen at this time of the year that you need to be prepared for.

I'm the officials that are calling every single foul in practice. I'm the other team that's making every three. I'm the other team that won't let the ball go in the basket. I'm the one that is changing the rules and making sure that they have to fight through it. Does it work all the time? No, some kids when you put them in that situation -- I've had teams, well, back in the day with Sue and D and those guys were playing, we would play eight against five when we were working on some stuff.

If I came to practice and I made them play six against five, they would think I was disrespecting them. You don't think we can guard these eight guys?

Fast forward now to 2018, '19, '20, and we do that. It was, like, well, it's not fair. Like, how can you ask us to do this? It's eight of them and five of us. So there are some teams that want that challenge and accept it. The harder you make it for them, the more they enjoy it. There are other teams that don't really want to deal with that.

This team no matter what I throw at them, they always just go, all right, we got this.

That's why I'm happy for them, because they do put up with a lot every day in practice, and it's made them who they are right now. Let's just hope that we can -- it might all fall apart next Friday night. Who knows? So far so good. Winning this game is so hard. I mean, imagine the catastrophic feeling if UConn loses this game today. Oh, my God, you know, 38 or -- whatever the heck we are, and everybody back home everywhere, oh, you're undefeated, and you can't get to the Final Four. That's tragedy.

Winning this game is so hard. Once you get there, no matter what happens there, hey, that was a great year, man. We got to the Final Four. It's unfortunate that you didn't win. Some people would say that. So that's why I'm so happy for them to be going to the Final Four.

Q. In terms of what you were just talking about being proudest of this group because of the undefeated aspect of it, what makes this group different and your feelings about them than previous undefeated groups you've had thus far?

GENO AURIEMMA: Maybe because we don't walk around with that attitude. Like Jamelle Elliott and Jen Rizzotti did back then or Sue, D, and Asjha, Swin, and Tamika. They walked around like, what did you think we were going to lose? Maya, Tina, Renee, Stewy, they walked around like why are you surprised we're undefeated?

This group, they don't have that kind of swagger, trash talking kind of mentality. That's why I think for me I just keep my fingers crossed because it's not the kind of team that I've had in the past that has gone this far undefeated. It's not. They don't have that kind of mentality off the court, on the court. They're just, you know, a bunch of really nice kids that play hard for each other.

Q. With all the freshmen journeys you've ever seen, how would you describe Blanca's?

GENO AURIEMMA: Aye, aye, aye. A combination of Diana, Svetlana. I think maybe those two. Nika. You notice I'm hitting on a theme, right? A bunch of immigrant kids, international kids brought up differently, very stubborn, very hard-headed, very sure of themselves, won't back down to anybody any time ever.

They all have one thing in common, honestly. People that know what I'm talking about will know. They have one thing in common. Two words you'll never hear come out of any of those people's mouth, "you're right." They are just so hard to coach, and at the same time they're so rewarding. It's such a rewarding feeling coaching them because you're not kind of fighting with them. You are kind of give and take, you know, tug-of-war, I want what I want from you, they want what they want from me, and it's back and forth. We try to meet in the middle.

The finished product usually is just an unbelievable competitor who they have so much pride in themselves. P there's never a yes, sir from them, which I love. You get some kids that I could tell them whatever I want tell them, and they'll go, okay. And they'll go do it. They'll try to do it. These guys, you tell them something they don't want to hear, they just look at you like you're crazy. Yeah, they do.

You guys see the Syracuse game? She got out on the court. Blanca got out on the court. First time she touched the ball, she jacked up a three. The next time down the floor, first time she touched it, she jacked up another three. Third time down the floor, she touched it, she yakked up another one. I called her over and took her out of the game.

I called her over, and I said, what are you doing? I said, do you know how many shots Sarah Strong has since you got in the game? Zero. She looked at me, like, so? I ain't worried about Sarah Strong. I'm getting the shots I want.

Fast forward, we're playing North Carolina, she comes in off the bench. First time she touches it, she jacks up a three. I think it was an air ball or something. It's like that conversation we had never happened, right? I'm smiling

because I love that kind of stuff. It keeps me young. Keeps my hair gray, but it keeps me young.

Q. With this win, what does it say about this group and the discipline that you bring to this team?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think every coach tries to have a disciplined team and discipline can mean different things to different teams. He I think we are disciplined about some things, but again, our youth and our wanting to make big plays sometimes gets in the way.

So I don't know that we're as disciplined as I want us to be, or they're not as disciplined as they need to be obviously, but when we need to be, we are. That I think is right now the best you can hope for, because taking players that want to make plays all the time and trying to teach them when to, that's not an easy task.

Q. I've been in conferences with Coach Ralph all year, and she's talked about the balance between the science of set plays and the art of just playing basketball and making reads. I'm curious to ask you in March how do those two things interact, especially when teams are scouting you so much and are trying to blow up every single thing you have?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, and that's pretty much the essence of what we're trying to do every day in practice. We're trying to simulate playing the best teams in the country that won't let you run plays, and you just have to play basketball and play together and play off each other.

Then there comes a time when you look out there, and it's chaotic, and it doesn't look like anything that's going to work. Then there are times when it just flows and it's perfect.

So you're constantly paying attention to what is it right now? Is it chaotic and I need to reel it in? Is it moving perfect, and we can just flow with it? You know, you try to run the play you think you need to run to get that person a shot with the understanding it's probably not going to work. That they're so good defensively, the teams you're playing this year, they won't let you get it. But then whatever option B, C, and D is, then maybe you need to know where to go.

As a coach, any coach, I think it's hard to teach that, but I think all the best teams are able to do that.

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