

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 4 Semifinal - Oklahoma vs UConn

Friday, March 28, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

UConn Huskies

Geno Auriemma

Azzi Fudd

Sarah Strong

Paige Bueckers

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



So having made that decision clears a few things up for her and allows her to -- hopefully, allows her to just focus on playing and doing what she does best.

Paige has been in this situation a lot, Azzi has not, so I'm sure she's anxious to play in this environment in a game of this magnitude. The only thing I worry about when kids are -- you know, when it's their first real, real, real exposure to this when they haven't played in a long time is they try so hard. They put so much into it. So if we can keep it kind of like the other games that we've played recently, I would think she's going to play great.

Q. Can you talk about the post matchup and kind of the challenges that it presents for you?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, their post situation is different. There aren't very many teams in the country that they both happen -- well, two of 'em both happen to be here, them and UCLA -- you know, where they have got a dominant post player that can single-handedly win you a game. It certainly takes a lot of pressure off your shooters knowing that if you're not making a lot of shots on the perimeter, you always got somewhere to go to get a bucket. Certainly the effect that she's had on their team has been tremendous.

On our side, not so much. You know, it's more significant for us when we go to our small lineup and people have to match up with Sarah playing in the middle. So we pose a different sort of problem. But I wouldn't want to have to play three or four games guarding Raegan Beers, and I'm not sure anybody wants to have to play against Sarah four games in a row, so it will be interesting.

Q. Curious what your reaction to seeing JuJu's injury was the other day. I know you guys were still at the arena when it happened. And then also, just given being around the sport, seeing also what your program has experienced over the last few years, what do you feel like is the best path forward in the women's basketball community to get a better handle, hopefully, on, some of these horrible injuries that they're experiencing?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, we were made aware of it right

THE MODERATOR: All right, we'll get started with questions for Coach.

Q. I think you've said that the best way you prepare for these games is you do what you do best. Can you win this game if Oklahoma does what it does best?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, that's why they keep score. They're going to obviously not do what they do worst, and neither are we. So I think we've got to play the way we normally play and we got to make some adjustments, obviously, like you always do at this time of the year.

But their style of play is very similar to ours, and I think playing at a pace that they play at, I think, causes problems for a lot of people, and playing at the pace that we play at causes problems for a lot of people. So it will be an interesting matchup.

Q. Azzi's played really well of late, has shot really well. Just wondering what you see in her play lately, what you hope to see in her play, and kind of the approach she takes to this stage. Now with her future plans being announced, I don't know if that puts her even more at ease in this situation.

GENO AURIEMMA: I hope so. Sometimes these things weigh on players' minds, as they should, you know. It's a big decision. You want to try to have as few distractions in your head as possible at this time of the year, you know.



after our game, I think it was, right? Right after our game. Somebody came in our locker room and wanted to show it to me, and I still haven't seen it. I've seen enough of those in my career. I didn't want to see another one.

I talked to Lindsay that night and there's really nothing you can do about it. I mean, everything's been tried. People try and there's probably more emphasis than ever before put on prevention, the science behind it, and how much time and effort is spent trying to prevent these kinds of things happening. I don't know what the answer is.

Somebody texted me after this happened and said, Maybe they should do some preventative surgery. You know, like let's just cut up every kid, you know. So that's a pretty extreme solution.

It's just one of those unfortunate things that happens, and I feel terrible for JuJu personally, knowing the players that I've had that have had to go through that, how much it means to them, what they're missing for the whole year that they're out, and for Lindsay, for her teammates. And I think the effect that it has on the tournament, I think is huge from a competitive standpoint, star power, and I think the USC kids will probably rise to the occasion and play amazing like they did the other night.

But I don't know what the solution is. I don't. I think when kids come to college, a lot of them are already overused, and I don't know how much that has to do with it. I was talking to Mark Few yesterday, and he's talking about the same things. People think that, you know, if you work as hard as Kobe did, you'll be like Kobe. And I don't know that you can work twice as hard as Kobe and you won't be like Kobe. So I think sometimes kids overdo it at a young age and it catches up to 'em, among other things, you know, that you can't -- you know, biological things you probably can't do anything about.

Q. Piggybacking off of that question, what did you say to Lindsay that night that afterwards? I know she had mentioned that you had sent a message to her. And as a coach having gone through this before where you lose a critical player for a long time, what's the biggest challenge in kind of rallying your team going forward, knowing that you might have a different identity?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it does change your identity because when you come to rely so much on one player -- not because you set out to be that way, it just happens that way. Great players like that just dominate the whole environment on your team. But what ends up happening is one of two things. And I don't know their personnel well enough, you know, off the court, but the danger sometimes is one or two people on the team start to want to be like

JuJu. I'll do all the things JuJu did. And then that takes them out of their character and they play worse.

So the only thing that's helped us in those situations is you hope you have a couple other really good players, which they do, certainly, and that you ask each player to do like that much more, be a little bit more attentive, you know.

But anytime you try to make up for it, it usually backfires. And the other thing is if you're mourning, and that happened to us one year, we lost Shea Ralph. We were undefeated, we were No. 1 in the country, we were by far the best team in America, and the very first game in the NCAA tournament she tore her ACL on a breakaway layup. Same thing. Nobody near her, nothing. And the kids start -- they wrote her name on their shoes, and it was like someone had passed away, you know, a family member. And it was the worst thing that ever happened, and we lost, a game we probably shouldn't have lost against a really good team.

So I think if you just look at it for what it is and let's move on and everybody just do a little bit more. But I think sometimes it's just natural that people want to fill that void. Again, I hope we're playing them. So I hope that they are able to overcome it. I actually hope we're playing them or Kansas State. I just hope we're playing.

Q. A little bit off topic, but today Doug Bruno announced that he was stepping down after more than three decades at DePaul, and I wanted to get your thoughts on his legacy.

GENO AURIEMMA: I was just talking to him in the hallway over there. It's funny you ask. There haven't been a lot of people in the history of women's basketball that have given as much to the game as he has. He's dedicated his life pretty much to women's basketball, and all of it in Chicago where he grew up, so he's an institution.

I don't think there's a kid in the Midwest, right? Name all the states. I don't care. Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois. I don't care. They know someone or they themselves have been to Doug Bruno's basketball camp over the years. And in his words, you know, he doesn't want to step away, but he knows he has to, and that's somewhat of a relief, I think, knowing that circumstances have forced me into this situation.

So it's sad for me personally because he's a great friend, and we've been through a lot together, and sad for women's basketball that a lifelong supporter of the game isn't going to be coaching, but he'll still be a supporter of the game. I'm happy for Patty, his wife, and his kids and grandkids because they will get to see more of him.

Q. This isn't the first year you guys have had the transfer portal open during the tournament. Obviously, the timing has changed a little bit. Curious as a staff how you sort of deal with being pulled in multiple directions that are both vital for the growth of your program, and then sort of more broadly, if you had a magic wand, like, is there a better time for this? Is it a football response where they have two windows that sort of allows changes?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, there's just a lot of things going on right now that take away, I think, some of the focus of the players, some of the focus of the coaches, obviously. The portal has become a big cloud that hangs over everything. Like, for instance, do you think the NBA will ever have open free agency during the NBA playoffs? I doubt that. Right? It's got to be some time after all this is over, right? It's got to be when the schools have finished playing. There's got to be some sort of way to track and monitor and penalize tampering, like there is in the NBA. There's got to be a guideline of what you can do in free agency, which is basically what it is.

The two windows, yeah, I'm in favor for anything that doesn't interfere with what you're trying to do as a coach with your team. Even though I think players on every team that's playing in the tournament have already decided I'm either staying or I'm leaving. But it's never been harder to -- you know, at least in the pros you know who is under contract and who is a free agent. It's very difficult to live in an environment where every single kid on every team throughout the country on all 350-some Division I teams is a free agent. So I hope everybody that came up with this plan is really happy, you know.

Q. I know you talked about it before, this is your third year out here for the regional on the West Coast, but going ahead to next week the two winners of this regional will have a cross-country trip to Tampa. What is your thoughts on that quick turnaround on top of the cross country trip?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, first of all, there's always going to be somebody that has to travel, whoever is in the West region when the finals are on the East Coast, and vice versa. So somebody is always going to have to travel. But it would only be one team, correct? One team.

Secondly, in a normal world, run by normal people, there would only be four teams here. Which means there would be no games today, the games would be tomorrow. Which means we wouldn't have to get up at 6 a.m. to have an 8 o'clock practice here this morning for an hour. Which means we wouldn't have to get up at 5 a.m. to have a 7:30

shoot around for half an hour. Takes us longer to get through security than to actually be on the court, okay? God bless whoever wins Monday night, okay, and they have got to fly cross country, which is all day Tuesday, then they have two days, Wednesday and Thursday, to play the biggest game of their life. The guys, who don't know shit about shit, according to a lot of women's basketball people, they finish Sunday and then they have Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and they play Saturday. But there's a lot of people in the women's basketball community that think they're smarter than that. So whoever came up with this super regional stuff -- and I know who they are -- ruined the game. They did. They ruined the game. Half the country has no chance to get to a game in person. But you're making billions off of TV. Well, actually you're not, that would be the men's tournament. So, yeah there's a lot of issues that they need to fix. And again, we could get our ass beat tomorrow and that won't change my feelings. Any other happy thoughts? (Laughing).

THE MODERATOR: We'll end on that upbeat note. Thank you, Coach.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll start with questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Paige, what is your advice to freshmen playing at this time of the year?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Advice for freshmen, I would say just do what got you here and just level it up a notch. Don't get outside yourself trying to do too much, but do what the team needs you to do and have fun and embrace it. This is what you dreamed of doing as a kid, playing at this level, on this stage, so just have fun and just play your best basketball.

Q. For Azzi, now that you've decided that you're coming back next year, does that ease your mindset at all at this point of the year?

AZZI FUDD: It definitely does. In making that decision, I definitely feel like I have a weight off my shoulder and now I can enjoy the rest of the season.

Q. Was that sort of the impetus, making that public now?

AZZI FUDD: Yes.



Q. Obviously tough week for JuJu Watkins, given what happened. Both of you have gone through an ACL injury and the recovery of that. I wondered, that first week, what do you remember from just that experience kind of coming to terms with things and after that, when you look back on your recoveries, what was the key thing to remember to really get you through that tough time?

PAIGE BUECKERS: The first week was devastation, a sense of just hurt, disappointment, a why me sort of mentality, why now, a lot of questions that have you that are going to go unanswered.

But then your motivation, your strength, your faith, peace kicks in of everything happens for a reason, and then surgery happens, and then you know that every single day that passes by is a day closer to you getting to play basketball again.

So for JuJu, you just -- your heart breaks for her, just the devastation that -- especially during right now, during the tournament, of not being able to be out there with your team during the most important part of the year. So I know especially we empathize for her, we've been there, and we know how much it sucks, but you don't get to be as good as JuJu if you don't have a great motor, a great work ethic, and she's going to attack this process just as she's attacked basketball, and just as she's great at basketball, she's going to be great at this recovery process.

Just disappointed for her but know she will be back better than ever and this will just be a little setback to the great story she will have.

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I remember just kind of shock, a little disbelief, the first week after getting hurt. Like, why did this happen? How did this happen? And then, like Paige said, once you have surgery, every single day is one day closer to you being back on the floor, so making sure that -- I have a bracelet that says "purpose" on it, and I wore that, and I made sure that every day I was doing rehab, literally anything, I was doing it with a purpose because I didn't want to take any shortcuts, and there would be a reason why a year comes, and I can't be back on the floor playing.

So I made sure to attack that and, like Paige said, I couldn't say it better, but I know that JuJu's going to come back from this and attack her rehab how she has every single day playing basketball like normal. But I was nauseous hearing the news for her. You don't want to see anyone go through it, but she's going to come back stronger.

Q. Paige, you've spent time here before. You're a Hoopfest champion. I guess when you think about the

loaded field here in this region, you know how much basketball means to this community. What does it mean to -- your game sold out tomorrow -- to see how far women's basketball has come and to see all the support you guys are getting in this community? What does that mean to you and your teammates?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, it means everything to be able to travel across the country and get the amount of support, hearing the game's sold out. Just to see the growth of women's basketball, you would think that you could put these games in any spot in the country, and you would have a great atmosphere and it could be sold out. So obviously, I've been here for Hoopfest. It's a great basketball community. They love basketball here, they love women's basketball, so it will be exciting.

Q. Kind of playing off that, we have seen interest in women's sports grow at the same time as sports betting, so I'm curious what experience has been like for you. Are you hearing more from angry bettors or how do you help manage that?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think sort of unaffected. I don't really hear much from sports bettors. I know the significance of, like, parlays and stuff. I'm sure our DMs are loaded sometimes, but no, I don't really check.

Q. Azzi, with this matchup against Oklahoma, you guys are going to be up against a team that has one of the best offenses in the country, really have fast pace, they have a big inside shooter, what do you feel like the defensive focus is? And also, how do you have to, on the offensive end, keep up with their kind of points?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I think this game is going to be really important group effort. They have really good guards, really good bigs, so everyone has to do their part. Guards have to help inside. The bigs are going to have to help us. But we got to make sure -- I mean, we know they like to play fast. So do we. We got to make sure that we're playing to our tempo of quickness and still, like, not getting outside of ourselves.

We know that, like you said, they've got a really great offense, so making sure that we're doing the best that we can to slow them down, make sure their shots are contested, not giving them as many open looks. It's going to be a challenge, but I think we're up for it.

Q. Sarah, curious about what you think about Raegan Beers and kind of that matchup and the difficulty that she specifically presents.

SARAH STRONG: She's a great player, a very physical and aggressive down low, but I believe in Chen's abilities to guard her.

Q. Paige, I know that you guys practiced at Gonzaga yesterday and you got a relationship with Jalen and Chet, just wanted to ask you how far that goes back and what those two guys meant to you as far as support in your career?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I remember Jalen playing there as a freshman, it was during COVID, so he didn't get to play in that arena with the experience of having the student section, which I know, I watched games, it's pretty crazy. But I know he killed it in front cardboard fans.

And Chet was there, I think a year, I think it was the next year after that, and he got that experience, so watching his games were extremely fun. They were both really great teams when they were both there. I remember Jalen's Final Four run, National Championship run, him hitting that bank shot. And then Chet just doing what he does. And now we have a former teammate Ines Bettencourt who is there now. So I have a lot of friends through the Gonzaga pipeline, and it's really cool to just be there, experience that and see how much they have meant to that program so, yeah, it's pretty cool.

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