

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

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

UConn Huskies

Geno Auriemma

Paige Bueckers

Ashlynn Shade

Kaitlyn Chen

Sweet 16 Postgame Media Conference

Connecticut - 82, Oklahoma - 59

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and get started with an opening statement from Coach and then take questions for the student-athletes.

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, yeah, it was a really interesting game the way it played out. We went from -- it felt like we couldn't get anything to go our way in that first half. I think the harder we tried to make a shot, the less shots we made. But for the most part, it might not have looked like it, but I thought what made it worse more than it looked like was that we played defense well enough that a team that's getting 85 or so every night, they had to work really hard for the 36 that they got in the first half.

We thought if we can get the same quality shots in the second half that we got in the first half, that it would start to go our way. And everybody had their moment, and obviously Paige was spectacular. That was as good a game as I've seen her play the whole time she's been here at the most important time. When you're a senior and you've been around as long as she has, this is what you're here to do, this is why you came here. So we're pretty excited about playing Monday night.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Paige, career night, looking for that championship. Just talk about what's going through your head, 6-8



from the three-point land when things are dropping like that?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Honestly, we just wanted to keep our season going as long as possible. We all love playing together, we love playing here. We just love this program and everything it means, so we want it to keep going as long as possible.

And we knew we were getting good shots in the first half. Stuff wasn't dropping, so we just wanted to stay consistent in the looks that we were getting and how we were getting them. So just trying to stay aggressive, read what the game is calling for, and just trying to do what it takes to win.

Q. Paige, not only a career high for you, but a record for most points scored by a UConn player in the NCAA tournament. When you think of how decorated this program is and so many legends that have come through, to be able to even find new ground to break, how does that strike you?

PAIGE BUECKERS: It's an honor. I'm extremely blessed and extremely grateful that I even get to play at UConn and be in these conversations with, like, the greatest of all time. But people see the points, but, like, a large just attribution to Sarah, Jana, Ice, the way they were screening for me, getting me open, getting me looks. Like, everybody sees the points, but nobody sees the screens set, the passes that were found to me. So it's, I guess, an individual point total, but it's really a team effort.

Q. Paige, it looked like Coach got after you a little bit there in the -- I think it was the second quarter, and then I'm guessing probably at halftime as well. I know you guys have such a back-and-forth, that you can kind of say anything to each other, but what were those interactions like and did it help you kind of come out hot in the second half?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, just an everyday interaction between Coach and Paige, him getting on me, him holding me accountable. I did have some mental lapses and some mental mistakes that I can't have at this point of the



season. So just, obviously, taking them but not letting them affect me in a negative way, affecting me in a positive way to not make those mental mistakes again, and turn it up a notch, yeah.

Q. Ashlynn, I was just curious, you have seen Paige and this killer instinct before, but to see what happened in the second half, how much does that just set the tone for all of you guys and what is it like when she does get hot like that as a teammate?

ASHLYNN SHADE: I think we're never really surprised when she gets on heaters like that. I think every shot Paige shoots is going in. So that helps to play out there with her. But when they are falling like that, it's super fun to be a part of. And she really just brings the energy and really motivates us to want to get the ball back, get a stop on defense, make big plays.

Q. Oklahoma are not particularly experienced in the tournament. You guys were here last year and have been here a lot before. Just what sort of role do you think your experience in the tournament played in this game and can help you moving forward?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think experience is a huge thing, especially in a game of runs, never get too high, never get too low. In the first half, they had a pretty -- I mean, a great first half, and we didn't make a lot of shots, but we dug down defensively, stuck to our defense, and I think that's what we want to just hang our hat on, is defense winning games, and depending how many shots we make or not that dictating how much we win by.

But just staying composed, weathering the runs, staying together, staying connected as a team, and making sure that we know it's a 40-minute game, not a 20-minute game, not a 39-minute game, all 40 minutes.

Q. Paige, you said that you want the season to keep going, that you didn't want this to be the last game. How much more conscious are you of that now that you've said that, yeah, you are going to the draft, knowing that the next game you guys lose is your last in a UConn uniform?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I mean, everybody at this point of the season is trying to keep winning to win a national title and keep their season going as long as possible. So everybody has the same goal. Whether your season's ending or your career's ending, you want to just take it one game at a time, one practice at a time, one possession at a time, and just focus on that and maximizing that, and not getting too caught up in the future.

But you do know in the back of your mind that every possession counts, and it will be my last season here at UConn. So obviously, you know that, but you try to just stay in the present.

Q. Paige, I know Coach has talked about trying to get you to sort of have that more of an attack first aggressive mentality. In the third quarter interview, he asked Holly Rowe to talk to you about taking over the game in the fourth, which you obviously did. Curious, how do you establish that mentality? Is it just, like, self-talk? Is it something you do before the game, throughout game, just sort of remind yourself of how to have that mentality?

PAIGE BUECKERS: No, I think it's just reading the game, seeing what the defense is doing, and just trying to remain aggressive, look for my shot. Looking for my shot helps other people get open. But more just a mentality of taking what the game is giving and showing to me. So, yeah, probably that.

Q. Kaitlyn, how would you describe what the locker room was at halftime? You guys hadn't played your best basketball. What allowed you to -- especially on the defensive end, what was the approach to make sure you came out and really set the tone on that end moving forward?

KAITLYN CHEN: Yeah, I mean, I thought our defense was solid in the first half. We just weren't hitting open shots, so we just focus on continuing to get those open shots, focus on executing our offense. And we knew that we had 20 minutes guaranteed left to play, so just giving it our all and just going out there and playing each possession and focusing on winning each possession.

Q. Paige, obviously you've been here before for Hoopfest, you guys won that in your high school years, and then coming here today, I'm curious about the environment that you remember from Hoopfest and then what you thought of the environment here in the Spokane Arena today, just so loud here for your entire team every time a shot was made.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, definitely a great environment. You feel like this is a basketball city. Coming here, I think it was in high school, for the three-on-three tournament, it was outside, but again, a great turnout, a great environment, a great atmosphere, as the same it was today. I thought the crowd was fantastic, the atmosphere was great. You could hear stuff from both sides. So, yeah, it was a great experience.

Q. Paige, you kind of let out a big vocal, you know,



Come on, there. With going into the -- under five there in the fourth quarter, was there anything with the struggles that the offense faced in the first half that kind of motivated you to be a little bit extra trying to ice that game in the second half there?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Just trying to bring the energy. It's easy to get down and not be as energized when the shots aren't falling, but we want to be energized on defense and continue to keep the pressure up, keep denying, keep getting out in passing lanes, and that will lead to open looks for offense and in transition.

So once shots start falling, you feel naturally just an energy boost, and then just trying to channel that throughout the rest of the game.

THE MODERATOR: We'll thank the student-athletes and take questions for Coach.

Q. You guys had only two turnovers in that second half, forced about a dozen or so. What went into that execution-wise and just desire defensively?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think for the better part of the last couple of months, we've done a really, really good job of taking care of the ball. I think there was just one game maybe in the last two months where I thought we didn't handle the ball really well. Our defense has been forcing a lot of turnovers. So we really didn't do anything different today than we've been doing. We knew we had to be really active. I thought our guards were really instrumental in keeping the ball out of the post as much as we did.

We're not big, so to speak. One of our best lineups is a smaller lineup, and so we take advantage of that by trying to play defensively where our main goal is to force turnovers, and if we can win that turnover battle. You know, I think they had, like, 18, I think, something -- no, 23, and we had 10. That's an extra 13 shots that we're going to get that they're not going to get. So we put a big emphasis on that.

Q. You said that this is the best you've seen Paige play. Obviously, she doesn't have to do anything else to cement her legacy at UConn, but what impresses you the most about how she just continues to find new ways to step up and elevate this team?

GENO AURIEMMA: Did I really say that, that that's the best I've seen her play? That came out of my mouth? Well, that's the most I've seen her shoot, and she was really bad defensively, so we can't just let her off the hook that easily. We still got, hopefully, a couple more games to go before she gets canonized.

We see this every day at practice, right? Every day at practice there's long stretches of exactly what you saw today and little by little it's dawned on her, I think, that there is no next year, there is no, you know, I can get this anytime I want. You're going to have to get it now or it won't be available anymore.

So what she does is not a surprise to anybody on our team. Today was unusual for her because she doesn't necessarily like to shoot the ball as much as she did today, but circumstances were perfect because of how Oklahoma was playing. But in the big picture -- yeah, I said this last week. I think Paige is held to a different standard than a lot of other kids. I think you see this a lot in sports, whether it's pro or college, where one person becomes the narrative, you know. I saw one thing today, it was in Paige versus Oklahoma or Oklahoma versus Paige and UConn.

So it's almost like, you know, the Trojan war here. We're going to send out Achilles, they're going to send out Hector, and we're going to see who wins. And it doesn't work that way. But, you know, Paige can do things during the course of a game that most people can't do. But she's certainly not going to win tonight's game or Monday's game by herself. And if we lose, it's not because she lost it.

So we've been talking about that a lot these last couple of weeks to just kind of put her at ease because the outside pressure just keeps growing and growing and growing. And then with this performance, people are going to expect 50 on Monday. So, you know, my job is to kind of alleviate that pressure.

You're surprised to hear that, huh?

Q. On that note, when you were talking about some other players that really stepped up, what did you see from Ashlynn and Kaitlyn, KK, especially on defense? I think combined they had a bunch of steals, Ashlynn with a lot of hustle plays. How did they help you guys get across the finish line?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it's supposed to be like that, right? It's supposed to be a collaboration and some people can do big things and can do a lot of things, and that's Paige's role on this team, to do big things. We have other players that their role is to do smaller things and if they all do their small things really, really well, we add them up to the big things that Paige is going to do, and we end up with a great win.

I see a lot of teams when somebody gets 40, they lose. That team loses. So I like the fact that we did get contributions from Ash and KK, Kaitlyn, Azzi, Ice, Jana.

Everybody that played contributed something, and I think the confidence that they have in Paige, knowing that when she gets like that, they just kind of have to do their part and everything will take care of itself. That's probably the biggest difference from this year to last year. We have more people that can help. And tonight they did.

Q. When Paige came out and sat down on the bench, you turned and said something to her. I was wondering if you recall what she said. And the second part is she said that mentality is taking what the game gave her, but I'm sure there's a coaching element too. How challenging is it to coach that kind of mentality into a player where it might not necessarily come natural?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, one of the coaches said, Paige needs a breather. It was, like, two minutes and something left on the clock. And there's a huge ovation for her when she came out. And I asked her whether she came out so she could get a huge ovation. And she said, No, I was tired. I didn't believe it. I didn't believe it. So that's what we were talking about.

Second, coaching really, really good players is really rewarding and it's invigorating, and you have to be on top of your game all the time because they challenge you in every way always, every day. Every day's a challenge. I've certainly lived through a lot of those challenges in my career. I've been fortunate enough. And they all struggle, I think, at times with -- they either want to do too much to be able to say that everything depends on me and because everybody tells 'em it depends on you, they then want to play 40 minutes and they want to get 40 points every night, or they're kind of almost embarrassed by all the attention, and so try to push it off a little bit and not do too much because they don't want to be seen as, oh, she wants to prove she's Paige Bueckers, you know.

So there's a balance there that they have to try to strike. And what I always tell -- and this goes all the way back to Dee, back in the day, You just need to be what your team needs you to be that night, whatever that is. So my conversation with Paige, I didn't say much in the locker room other than I just commented on all the buckets that Oklahoma got because she screwed up.

So at halftime when we were out there, we just talked about once your defensive mentality comes back -- because you're one of the best defensive players on our team. Once that mentality comes back, then you can start going about winning the game for us. So I think she was -- like she said, she was mentally making some mistakes defensively and it was carrying over. So that was basically it. She's full of it. She goes, I didn't take that in a negative

way. Big baby. I wasn't being negative (smiling). I was trying to help her. That's what you get. No good deed goes unpunished. She has to be right all the time.

Q. Besides Paige's defense, what was the message to the team in the locker room headed into the Elite Eight?

GENO AURIEMMA: After the game, you mean?

Q. Yes.

GENO AURIEMMA: Very much about how difficult Monday night's game is for every team that's playing in that game, whether it's the two teams playing here Monday night or the teams that are playing in the other region. You've worked 365 days almost, whatever it is, since you were last here, and you're knocking on the door there to get to the Final Four, the one thing that's the Holy Grail that every kid wants, right, to have an opportunity to play in the Final Four, and when you know you're one step. You are just one step, you know.

I sometimes use the analogy, more people die at the top of Everest because there's one last step you have to take, and that's when it gets 'em if it's going to get 'em. You put so much pressure on yourself. You can almost feel it. You're shaking. You want to win so bad. And you step out of character and you don't play your normal game. It's happened to us a bunch of times.

So we just briefly talked about it's going to be a really hard game Monday night, hard game for us, hard game for whoever wins this game, and hopefully, the experience that we've gained over the years, some of our players, maybe makes a difference, maybe not. I don't know. But when we got here -- before we got here, the unfortunate thing that happened with JuJu, leading up this thing it was all Paige versus JuJu. That's kind of disrespectful to the other teams, you know? So we certainly have never made it about that. It wouldn't surprise me if Southern California wins the National Championship and shows the character that those kids have.

So we wanted to make sure we keep the focus on I don't care who we're playing, this game is a bitch and don't talk about the Final Four.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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