

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Regional 4 Final - UConn vs USC

Sunday, March 30, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

UConn Huskies

Geno Auriemma

Azzi Fudd

Paige Bueckers

Elite Eight Pregame Media Conference



be somebody like JuJu. But if you have enough good people around her, which they do, they will get a chance to stand out even more than they would have ordinarily, so that could compensate for it.

So, yeah, they're a different team in a positive way and they're a different team in a negative way because of what happened.

Q. Speaking of the supporting cast around JuJu with Kiki Iriafen. She was obviously a star in her own right at Stanford and then now at USC, how does she -- like, them playing -- wanting to play through her a little bit more kind of change what you guys have to do and how do you guys look to kind of slow her down?

GENO AURIEMMA: Maybe it changes how they look in that she gets more touches than maybe she would. But I thought in the first game when we played 'em in Hartford, I thought she was one of the big differences in the game because of how many times they went to her later in the game. So I think we're -- hopefully, we're better equipped to deal with that than we were back then.

But they can shoot the ball really, really well and if you spend too much time on -- it was a similar challenge to last night, right? You know, you've got two things you've got to deal with and it's just a matter of at which point in the game are you willing to -- what are you willing to give up at that point in the game. The only thing certain is that you can't play against her one-on-one, just like we couldn't play last night one-on-one against Raegan Beers. So it's going to be about a lot of people and it's going to involve a lot of chess matches.

Q. You've long said the Elite Eight is one of the hardest games of the tournament. You've had some historic battles in this round. What is it about this game in particular that makes it so difficult, especially when you know what could be next?

GENO AURIEMMA: That's what make it's so difficult, what could be next. If what was coming next wasn't that important, it wouldn't be difficult. And everybody reacts differently to it. Preparing for the game is just like

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with questions for Coach.

Q. There's a lot of talk about enjoying the mission, the journey, but how do you do that when everything here is about what's next?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, yeah, that's the balance that you to have, to be in the moment, understanding what the moment means, and if you get a little bit ahead of yourself and start thinking about what comes after, then you're going to struggle in the moment that you're in. So same as actually during a game. You try to win every possession and you don't think about the outcome of the game. It's a lot easier said than done, but I think being a little bit more mature, I think, does help you do that.

Q. You saw this team in the Elite Eight last year. You saw them in the regular season. How different do they look right now missing JuJu but also just compared to the team that you saw in the tournament last year?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, going into the tournament, based on the season, I think they grew from the experience that they had last season, from the season and our game. I think they grew from that. And you could see it. I think the pieces that they added, their young players, certainly changed the makeup of the team, and that was really evident yesterday, obviously.

Yeah, we saw firsthand what it's like to play without someone who means so much to your team. We haven't been immune to a lot of that stuff over the years. At this time of the year, as you saw last night, someone has to step up and do all the heavy lifting, and that normally would



preparing for any other game when it comes down to that, but I think the actual game itself, you know, you want it to be like any other NCAA tournament game, but similar to what comes next, if you win Monday night, there's an added pressure that you put on yourself if you're not careful, where this shot's going to decide whether we win or lose. Well, the score's 2-2 in the first quarter. You know, it's not, really.

So you have to, you know, get yourself to get in that mindset, and people say, Well, take it one game at a time, take it one play at a time. We preach that, but in reality, some players are going to rise to the occasion and some are going to shrink. It's just the nature of it.

Q. Kennedy Smith's first game back from injury was the earlier matchup this season in Storrs. What do you see different maybe from her now, given all that time, and how does her defense maybe affect the game especially for them?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, it certainly did yesterday. And a lot of times it doesn't necessarily show up on the stat sheet. Yeah, their three steals, that shows up on the stat sheet, but how many plays are impacted by her presence and getting a tip of a pass or anything that disrupts the other team's offense. So I think she's really, really good at that. And coming from October to now, obviously, the number of games that she's played and how many of those situations she's been in, you know, you keep growing and you keep learning new things and you keep finding more ways to impact the game.

I think that's really coinciding with if JuJu's not here and Kennedy had not made any progress, I think they would be way worse off. But I think those freshmen, especially her, have made so much progress, that it takes a little bit of the sting out of it. And sometimes freshmen surprise you. You think they're going to be the most affected, and sometimes they're the least affected by the moment.

Q. You've been a part of the game for a long time. You're one of the people who has really helped build it to this point. This is the time of year where the lights are the brightest, the most eyes are on the game. Do you give yourself any amount of time during this part of the season to enjoy where the game has come?

GENO AURIEMMA: I do. It's hard not to see how far it's come, even though you're not -- you're really not looking for it. You're not going around every day trying to, you know, assess the state of the game. But it is all around you.

As a matter of fact, I was talking to Dee Kantner yesterday

before the game, and I said, Our very first regional, the way we got there was there was a shot with, like, one second left that Toledo took that didn't go in, and the buzzer sounded, and one official thought it was a foul and the other official thought time had already run out, and there's two officials and they're at the table talking about it. There's no video, there's no third official, there's no 15 different camera angles. It's just what did I see, what did you see. She comes out of that little meeting, goes like this (indicating), game's over, and we're off to the regionals, and it's our first Final Four after that.

And now you look at it today and it's a completely different game, completely different environment. There's more people sitting here in front of me today than I saw the entire year back then. It's just the level of play, the number of people playing, the number of teams that are competing at a high level. There isn't anything that's the same. Really, there isn't. Yeah, do I think about our impact on it, UConn's impact on it? It's hard not to, and I think that's for other people to assess what our impact has been, but I am pretty satisfied that we've had a pretty big impact on the game.

Q. The parallels between Paige and JuJu's injuries are so similar because of the injury, who they are, all of the things. I'm wondering what kind of encouragement watching Paige's performance last night could give anyone who is worried about JuJu, wondering what it's going to be like for her to come back.

GENO AURIEMMA: I think the strength of the person that's being affected by it ultimately determines what the comeback looks like. Some people, they go into a long, deep depressive state and it takes 'em a long time to get out of it and it sets their progress back, and others are very, very positive about it, very much attacking it like they attack the game, and I would think JuJu's in that mold.

And I don't know that anyone that I've coached that suffered an injury like this that was the quality of player that we're talking about that didn't come back better because that's what makes them who they are. For them, it's another challenge, it's another game to win, it's another opponent that they have to beat. And if you're a competitor, if you're somebody like Paige, somebody like JuJu, or some of the other kids that have gone through this, they come back better, they come back stronger, they come back more determined, more resilient, more understanding that they can fight through things and overcome just about anything.

They're tested in a way they have never been tested before. It's refreshing to see them when you understand what's involved in the rehab here, how long this takes and



how many dark days there are, and then they come out of it and see something like last night. Yeah, that's the thing that keeps them going those 12 months.

Q. Jeff Mittie was saying before their Sweet 16 game that there wasn't a lot of film on what they could watch without JuJu for USC, and I'm wondering, you have about twice as much tape as he did to watch, do you have a good sense of what you're going to see from USC or are you still trying to figure that out?

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't think we watch any more or any less. I do think that it's a little more unpredictable. It's less certain of certain things that you knew you were going to expect. You knew this is what is going to happen at the end of the game, this is what's going to happen in the middle of the game, this is what happens at the end of the shot clock, this happens at the end of the quarters. You know, a little more unpredictable, but that's why you try to get conceptually what are they doing as opposed to specifically what are they doing because that could change.

You knew it wasn't going to change before, but that could change during the course of the game, and you don't know which direction they're going to go in. You knew back then.

So you can't watch film and go, Oh, yeah, they're going to go here, and then the very next quarter they're going there because there isn't a set -- you know Kiki's going to be more involved, but other than that, you really don't know.

So you keep the focus on us, you know. It was like that last night. Conceptually, this is what they do, this is what they like to do, this is what we have to prepare for. How it happens, that's fluid. The game of basketball is so fast, it's so fluid. We don't have a chance to call timeout after every possession and set our offense and defense up. So you just have to be flexible and as a coach, you just cross your fingers. That's the best strategy for coaching I've come up with (smiling).

Q. Could you talk about Ashlynn's toughness yesterday after she -- when she got hit, she kind of bounced right back up, and also how she kept the team kind of a float in the second quarter yesterday, and going forward to Monday, what do you think she will do?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I know that I am guilty of taking Ashlynn Shade for granted. Probably the thing I appreciate the most about her is that she's my target for everything that goes wrong on the team, and I appreciate that she doesn't hold it against me personally. I remember last year, she made a comment, Every day Coach tells me how bad I am, how unaware I am defensively, how I get

everything wrong every time, and that he thinks I'm terrible, but I know that's just his way of saying he loves me.

I mean, who wouldn't want a player like that? I wish I had 12 of them. And I do take her for granted, but at the same time, 99 out of a hundred times I can't take her out of the game. Whether she's playing well or not playing well, whether she's scoring or not scoring, there's just something about having her in the game that makes me feel better until it doesn't. But I don't take her out anyway. She just gives me an opportunity to vent.

But I know she's never going to back down, I know she's never going to give in to anybody, she's never going to stop competing, never going to stop trying to make a play. And it can go unnoticed until that first half yesterday when you realize she's the only one that is able to get something going. And I respect her so much because last year she was playing 30-some minutes a game and starting in last night's game. And yesterday she had as big an impact as she did last year in a different role.

She loves the game of basketball. She's a hell of a competitor, and I have confidence in her. I would never tell her that, but I do.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. We'll be back with UConn student-athletes in just a moment.

(Pause.)

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

Q. Paige, at this time of the year how do you enjoy the journey when everything about this time of the year is what's next?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Well, good morning to you too. Just trying to stay present, stay in the moment. I think that's been an emphasis for our team, not looking to the future and not worried about the past, but trying to be the best version of ourselves every single day. And you can't win the next game if you don't win the practice ahead, the weight room session ahead, and conquer everything that's in front of you. So one day, one moment at a time.

Q. There's not a lot of USC film without JuJu on the floor, so how do you guys prepare to take on this team that looks -- will look a lot different without playing through her?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think they just run a lot of sets. They're going through Kiki a lot now to get buckets. She's a great player. They're still a great team and they have



great pieces. They made it to the Elite Eight for a reason. Obviously, losing a player like JuJu hurts, but they're still a great team, they still got great pieces. I think they run the same sets but for different people, so scouting that, looking at that, knowing the offense, knowing what they run, and just trying to make them as uncomfortable as possible.

But they have got players that have filled the void, that have stepped up huge, and so I think it's just a matter of learning their sets and knowing other people's tendencies.

AZZI FUDD: You did a great job answering that.

THE MODERATOR: Do you have anything to add?

AZZI FUDD: No.

Q. Paige, what do you recall about the way USC defended you back in the matchup in December and what is it about their defense overall that makes them so tough on that end?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, they're a really good defensive team. They have great guard defense, they have great interior defense, they get out, deny, make things difficult, pressure, try to turn you over, speed you up, and so we just got to stay composed, stay playing our tempo and our pace. But they do a really good job of trying to create chaos and force turnovers and being aggressive on the defensive end, which leads to what they want to do on offense, so just knowing that and being prepared for that.

Q. Can you talk specifically about what Kennedy Smith brings as an on-ball defender and are you expecting to see a lot of that matchup, and if so, what are your thoughts on it?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, she's a great defender. You would think she is not freshman the way she's experienced and the way she plays defense, but just her mentality, her tenacity, her length, her agility, her speed, her lateral movement. She does a really good job of anticipating as well. She has great defensive instincts. So she's a great defensive player, and so whatever -- I don't know who she will be matched up against, but she does a great job defensively.

Q. You both have had knee injuries, and I'm wondering if you could say, what is the toughest part of the rehabilitation and? Then Paige, when you have a game like last night, what kind of encouragement should that give JuJu that you can go through something like this and come back not only as good as you are, but even better, possibly?

AZZI FUDD: For me, I would say the toughest part was mentally. I think as an athlete, we know how to get through the hard stuff physically. Every day in practice is hard, during the season is hard, lifting is hard. So for me, it was mentally and just trying to figure out -- trying to be in a good place that I can find positives in this rehab process when the only thing I want to do is be on the court with my team and playing.

So I think mentally was where I grew the most last year and still now, I'm still growing still working on it, but I think that definitely was the hardest part and where I grew the most.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, when I was coming back from my injury, I drew a lot of inspiration from my teammates, from people who came back from major injuries. Kelsey Plum and Breanna Stewart were a couple of 'em. And then a lot of my teammates actually had ACL injuries prior to when I had it.

So just looking at them for inspiration and looking at them as a blueprint and a how-to and knowing their story, their journey, and how they came back from it and using it as an inspiration to what I want to accomplish. And so just to be able -- I know last year, a huge part of my journey was wanting to inspire people who have gone through terrible injuries, devastating blows, that you can come back better and stronger, and nobody can write you off, nobody can put you in a box to the injury-riddled narratives, this, that, but you can break all those narratives, and you can come back better than ever mentally, physically, emotionally. So that was a huge inspiration that I drew from and you hope to inspire as well.

Q. The UCLA players talked about working with sports psychologists, and they have a mind gym and they center mental health and how it's helped them, especially at this point of the year. I'm wondering how much you guys rely on a sports psychologist at this time of year and how it helps your team.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I work with a sports psychologist. I know a lot of people on the team do. But it's just a grounding point of a person who you can go to and there's no judgments, it's a judgement-free zone, and they can just talk to you about anything, just ease your nerves, calm you down, get you to focus on everything but what's going on in the present and just trying to be, I mean, the best version of yourself.

I know a lot of things can happen during this time, a lot of pressures, the stakes, what you're trying to accomplish, you can get caught up in that, but just -- I know a huge emphasis for me was staying present, staying in the

moment, standing firm in who we are as a team, who we want to be as individual, and just not getting too caught up in anything else but trying to be present for the team, enjoy every moment.

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I think talking to someone is super helpful. I know it's helped me a lot this year. And having that kind of foundation of talking to them all year has helped now. Being in March, I kind of -- I just have a better sense of where I am, not getting stressed, not playing into the pressure, but I think it definitely helps just having that relationship with them. And like she said, it's a judgment-free zone. You can go to them for anything.

And, yeah, I would say a huge emphasis for me also is staying present this year and controlling the controllables, making sure that -- in order to do what I do best I can't get outside of myself. So knowing what I can control and not getting upset with the things that I can't and making sure I'm just doing what I can.

Q. Paige, was there anyone notable that you heard from after last night's game or that stood out after that kind of performance on that stage?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Lots of friends, lots of family just reaching out offering support. Yeah, that's about it.

Q. Azzi, obviously you come from a basketball family, and you're also from the DMV. I just wanted to kind of ask you, how does both of those -- how have they prepared you for success at this level?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I think having, I think coming from a basketball family, having two parents that played and coached me growing up, I can't imagine growing up any other way. I mean, they're the reason that I am the way I am, the reason that I have my work ethic and my kind of detail-oriented mindset, and also like the reason for my shot. So I kind of thank them for everything. But I think that kind of set the foundation for me on what to expect, just my mindset of never settling, never getting complacent.

And then being in the DMV, they have got some of the best basketball, so competing at such a high level from when I was younger, to high school and now, seeing all the people I played against in high school still playing in March and doing well, always supporting other DMV athletes, but I think just getting to compete at such a high level at a young age definitely helped prepare me for now.

Q. Coach always talks about how difficult the Elite Eight game is because there's so much at stake. You've had your biggest games in the Elite Eight round

against Baylor, North Carolina State, USC, you scored 27 or 28 in each of those games. Do you just get up mentally for that big game because there's so much at stake?

PAIGE BUECKERS: You try not to think about the stakes or the pressure or getting to the Final Four. Obviously that's there, so you try not to think about it and just go out and play every single game the same way like it's your last, like it's the most important 40 minutes of your life. So whatever that calls for on any given night you just try to do that and prepare for that. But as a team we just want the season to keep going as long as possible. So leaving nothing up to chance, giving it our all, like I said, for that 40 minutes to play for another 40 is our team mindset.

Q. Azzi, how different do you feel kind of physically and mentally from the last time you faced USC coming off multiple injuries in sort of a sense?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, I feel completely different. I tried to play in our last game against USC and I just wasn't ready, and that's okay. But, so, yeah, I feel like a completely different player, definitely a completely different mindset as well. But I'm super excited, and yeah, I mean, I feel I'm in a completely different place than I was then so I'm excited to play.

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