

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

Monday, March 31, 2025

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Arena

**UConn Huskies**

**Geno Auriemma**

**Paige Bueckers**

**Sarah Strong**

**Kaitlyn Chen**

Elite Eight Postgame Media Conference

UConn - 78, USC - 64

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: Obviously these games are really, really, really hard. There was just so much going on in the game that both teams, I think, had to struggle through. And as we said, there's a way that you win these games and, generally speaking, they are on the backs of one or two particular players that are going to put the team on their backs and get us to the next level, to get us to the Final Four, and obviously Sarah and Paige both did that tonight in their own way, and you couldn't ask any more of them. They both played 40 minutes and they both played their hearts out.

But like anything else, somebody else has to step up, and I thought Kaitlyn was fantastic tonight. Probably more than anything, I'm really proud of her because she left college, took a chance, I want to go to the Final Four, I want to try to play for a National Championship, and I'm glad that we're able to provide the opportunity for her.

So these three guys deserve all the credit that you want to give them and obviously we would be going home without the three of them.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. You seem to have just the innate ability to know**



**exactly when your team needs you to take over for a little bit. Curious if you felt that in the beginning of that fourth quarter when you kind of went on a little mini run and then sort of where that instinct developed.**

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think just playing a lot of basketball, getting a lot of reps at it, having a great team that has so much confidence in you, a coaching staff that has so much confidence in you and just builds you up so you feel confident in these moments, but none of it would happen without the team and everything that goes into a performance.

So just trying to read what the game is calling for, read what the -- what we need at that moment, at that time, whether it's passing, rebounding, scoring, just trying to do whatever it takes to win.

**Q. Paige, how would you compare this team to the other Final Four teams that you've been a part of and what do you think you've learned from those previous trips that can help you all this time around?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: I would say this team is a little bit younger just in terms of our most experienced guys are at times sophomores on the court. So we're pretty young in that way. But we got a whole lot of heart and a whole lot of toughness about us and we play together as a team. We're super well connected. I feel like every team that I've played on we've been super well connected, but just the way -- we've been through so much adversity as individuals, as a team, and how much it's brought us together, how much it's made us stronger -- and what was the second part of your question?

**Q. What lessons have you learned from these Final Four trips.**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Just taking it one possession at a time, the possession you're in is the most important possession of the season, not getting too caught up in what if that, what if this, just staying present, staying in the moment, not worrying about the pressures or the stakes because everybody's dealing with it, everybody's there to



win a national title, and nobody is there on accident. Everybody there is elite and great and there for a reason. So just sticking to being in the moment, staying present and capitalizing off of everything.

**Q. Kaitlyn, you kind of stepped into a bigger role defensively in these two games, played a big role as an on-ball defender. How do you feel the team's defense, the pressure specifically on the perimeter. Played into your wins against both Oklahoma and tonight?**

PLAYER #1: I feel like that's something that we always put an emphasis on we're always talking about on ball pressure and the more on ball pressure we have the better our defense is. I feel like our coaches prepare us very well for both of these games, and we were locked in defensively for most of the game.

**Q. Kaitlyn, as a transfer coming into this program I was wondering if you could talk about what this experience means for you to be going to the Final Four and to have this moment.**

KAITLYN CHEN: It's been an incredible experience so far. Honestly, I never thought I would make it to a Final Four, but here I am. But that's all -- all the credit goes to my coaches and my teammates because we wouldn't be here without them.

**Q. Kaitlyn, I wonder, when were you at Flintridge Prep dominating on a very small school circuit, were you perhaps a UConn fan and could you have conceived of this then?**

KAITLYN CHEN: Yes and no.

GENO AURIEMMA: Do you want to clarify what's the yes and what's the no?

KAITLYN CHEN: Well, yes, I was an UConn fan. I remember watching them play at UCLA sometime in my high school years, but -- and what was the second question?

**Q. Could you have pictured being part of this program headed to the Final Four?**

KAITLYN CHEN: No.

**Q. Kaitlyn and Sarah, this is a program where you go to the Final Four. A lot of people don't get to do that. Coach became the winningest coach in college basketball this year. Not a lot of people get to be part of that. How do you process this coming from high school and the Ivy League, like, going into these**

**historic moments but also treating them quite normally.**

KAITLYN CHEN: Honestly, I feel like I relied on my teammates a lot throughout this whole process. A lot of them have experienced this and deep runs in the NCAA tournament and just sort of looking towards them for guidance, and they're always so composed throughout the whole tournament, so just sort of fitting in and staying on par with them.

SARAH STRONG: I would say the same, relying on my teammates. They have been here before and they know what to expect, so just following them.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll excuse you to the locker room and take questions for Coach.

**Q. When I talked to you in the opening round, you said the best that Sarah had ever played was in the third quarter of the Big East championship game. Has that changed after tonight and what did you see out of her that impressed you?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I thought that stretch in the Big East tournament was really special, and it's ironic that everything she did tonight was pretty special. However, there's usually -- and I'll include Paige in this too, but not much surprises me, not much that Sarah does makes me go, Wow, I didn't know she could do that. Maybe I'm just so high on her that there's stuff that I saw her do in high school that I just close my eyes and thought, Wow, if you transfer this to college, I don't think anybody's going to be able to handle that because nobody has anybody that has the skill set that she has.

So we made a concerted effort to get her the ball and get her the ball early tonight for that reason. We knew it was going to be tough on Paige early on in the game. But Sarah impacts the game in so many ways, that you just have so much confidence in her, so much belief in her. I don't know. Can't explain it.

**Q. Same question that I asked Paige. How do you think this team is different from the other Paige teams that you've taken to the Final Four? And what do you think those runs or those experiences have taught her and your other players who are returning or that can help them this time around?**

GENO AURIEMMA: If you look at our roster, Paige has missed an entire season and missed an opportunity to go to the Final Four, Azzi's missed an entire season and then some and missed an opportunity to go, Caroline Ducharme, who is on our team has missed opportunities,

Aubrey with her injuries has missed opportunities.

I really believe that, as Paige said, having gone through all those things, and our team having to overcome all those issues, as individuals they had to overcome them, and then as a team, how do we get there with only five or six players, how do we get there when everybody's got to play 40 minutes, how do we get there in spite of everything. It has toughened us up a little bit and it has made us a little stronger individually and collectively, believe in each other a little bit more, maybe.

I think the confidence that we have in Paige and Sarah specifically makes everybody on our team feel really, really, really assured that I just have to -- I just have to do my part and it will be good enough.

But every journey's different, every team that goes to the Final Four at UConn is different, every kid's opportunity is different. They get to write their own unique story. At some point I'm just a long for the ride because it's really, really on their shoulders that all this happens.

**Q. A little clarity here. I know you guys haven't cut down the nets for a Final Four, or to go to the Final Four for a while, is it since 2008? Is that correct? Does that sound right?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I don't even know when it was that we have done it. I don't remember doing it, to be honest with you. We asked the players -- I think that's how it happened. We asked the players all the time, you know, they bring out a ladder, do you guys want to cut down nets, and they always said no. So we never asked them anymore, we just didn't.

**Q. Just saving it for Tampa?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I mean, we've cut down a bunch of those.

**Q. And then 17, or 16 of the last 17 NCAA tournaments you've made it to the Final Four, just what do you have to say about that impressive run?**

GENO AURIEMMA: I've used this before. I said, There's Disneyland, there's Disney World and then there's UConn World. These are fantasy numbers that make no sense. You couldn't predict this and you couldn't script this at all. We weren't in the Final Four a couple years ago. For the first time since 2008 we weren't in the Final Four. And I went to the men's Final Four, our men's Final Four, and they won a National Championship. And I thought, man, this is what I've been missing all these years. It was so much fun, it was unbelievable. No stress, just watching

other coaches lose their mind, right? I got to hear what fans say up in the stands, even about the No. 1 team in the country, and I thought, Man, people are brutal. And I realized I missed it. I missed the opportunity to compete for a National Championship. And when you go all the time you have to work really hard to make sure you don't get numb to it, that this is what we do, it's so hard to do. Even today, we got up what, 19 at one time? And people probably thought, oh, we're going to win by 35. It's not supposed to be like that. It's supposed to be hard. This is really, really hard. And I give a lot of credit to USC for what they were able to do, given what they had to endure, you know, with JuJu. It's not easy, I've been there, and I thought some of their kids stepped up and were terrific. Unfortunately, some of that stuff catches up to you, because at this point in the year somebody like JuJu would have been needed to carry them over the hump. Like, we got Paige. So I have a lot of respect for their coaching staff and their team and they could have easily just rolled over when we got up 19, and instead they fought back and I think cut it to six. That says a lot about them. And then we had to show some grit.

**Q. How important was it to get Azzi going in the fourth quarter after she was struggling with her shot and the opening three I think on the opening possession in the fourth quarter was that kind of designed in the huddle to try to accomplish that?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it was going to be like, we'll give her one more chance and then that's it, the hell with her. (Smiling). You got to believe in your players. You got to kind of feel like at some point all we need is one of them to go and then something good can happen. And as I was drawing it up it dawned on me, maybe you should put Paige in that spot. And I thought, Nah, let's give it a shot, let's see what -- this could be the one, you know? And that was a big shot by her. After having missed all of the other ones, that was a big shot by her. And then another one. And so, took a hunch, and ran with it. And it was big. Really big.

**Q. Paige was asked the other day where she thinks she stands among your favorite UConn players and she said somewhere between one and a thousand. I'm just curious though, over the last five years you guys have spent a lot of time together, obviously not where does she stand in that ranking for you, but how does she or how has she changed you at this point in your career?**

GENO AURIEMMA: I think she's thinking very highly of herself if it's one and a thousand. I would say maybe somewhere between five and a thousand. Because we have had a relationship since she got Connecticut that is

based on I trust her to always do what -- I trust Paige to do the right thing ever since her freshman year. I trust her to always do the right thing. After she's tried all the shit she wants to do, then she will finally do the right thing. But I trust that she believes in herself so much, she just is the most incredibly positive human being I've ever been around. She always takes the absolute highest view of what can happen, and no matter what anybody points out to her like -- when she was sitting up her, I pointed to her four turnovers, I said, What was that? And she immediately went to the next column and she said, Look, I got it back, I got four steals. Like that's, her mentality is always, this is what I did to help us win, I'm not worried about what the other stuff was. And I've admired that in her forever, that she believes in herself, whether you believe in her or not, and I happen to believe in her, you know, 100,000 percent.

And I feel for her too, because I don't think I've ever coached someone in this generation where they have to deal with this type of scrutiny and pressure that comes from the world that they live in. She's the first one. The other guys were able to kind of navigate it, you know, there was pressure, but not like there is today. So for her to get all the attention she gets, have all the demands on her life, all the expectations in her life, and still be able to deliver, she -- yeah, I thought she was a unique individual when I saw her in high school and she's very unique, so she's not between one and a thousand, when I say unique, I think she's closer to one or two or three of most unique players I've ever coached. And I'm really going to miss her. I can't say that out loud (laughing).

**Q. It's clear you have a great relationship with Paige, this was a great scoring weekend for her consisting of multiple significant scoring runs. You've touched on the depth of this team, but despite this being a considerably deep roster, how valuable is it going into the Final Four that you have a player that can really take over and take the game out of the other team's hands?**

GENO AURIEMMA: You're not going to win without it. Well, first of all, you wouldn't get there without it, without that "it" thing, where one player, in this case Paige and Sarah, without those two players playing to the level that they're playing at, you wouldn't get to the Final Four. The question about 15 or however many Final Fours out of the last 16, is that what you said? 15 out of the last 16? 16 out of 17. Our team and our program got us to the regionals 30-some times. But I probably could sit here if we had enough time and name you the one or two -- well, some years we had three or four -- players that stand up during this weekend and get you to the National Championship game. So, if we don't have, if you don't

have those players, you're not going anywhere. And then once you get there, if those guys don't play great, you're not going to win. You'll be done after the first game. So as good as your team is, as deep as your team is, and you think it is, as much, you know, as you think you have, there's at least two right here (indicating) that if they don't play great next Friday night, we're not going to win. So if you said those two aren't going to play, there's no reason to get on the plane, because if you don't have guys like that, you don't have a shot. But we do have those two, and they have proven that they will play like that in the biggest games. So, yeah, I'm pretty confident in that and so are the other players.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thanks, everybody.

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