

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: UConn vs Stanford

Friday, April 1, 2022

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Target Center

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Paige Bueckers

Nika Muhl

Evina Westbrook

Semi-Final Postgame Media Conference

UConn 63, Stanford 58

GENO AURIEMMA: We said the other day that points are hard to come by in this tournament. Today was certainly no different. You're going to have to win some other way than thinking you're just going to come out here and it's going to be nicey nicey and they're going to let you shoot whatever shot you want to shoot. And same with them, we're going to guard them, they're going to guard us and you've just got to tough it out, you've got to rebound the ball better, you've got to play defense better, you've got to get every loose ball, you've got to make your free throws.

We didn't exactly play our A game on the offensive end, but the things we needed to do when we had to do them, we came up big. I don't know what more I can say about this group than we've been saying, but it was pretty remarkable, to be honest with you.

Q. Nika, it was maybe two months ago that you were up on the dais at Storrs and you said we're going through hell right now with the injuries and the losses that were piling up. What did it take to get from that point to where you are today and what did that kind of grit that you had to develop, how do you think that showed up tonight in a sluggish game?

NIKA MUHL: We're still not complete. We're still missing Dorka and Aubrey. Just a lot of faith in each other. Just a lot of faith in our coaching staff, what they're saying. A lot of concentration and focus on what we have to do every day to get here, and we just stuck together, like every other



time.

I don't think there was ever a doubt in ourselves.

Q. Paige, it can be really hard to win in your hometown. A lot of players feel a lot of pressure. I just wonder if you can take us through toward the end, the fourth quarter, especially you got banged up a little. Are you okay? You seemed kind of on a mission not losing this game one way or another.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I knew it was going to be a very competitive sort of sluggish game. Both teams are trying to win a National Championship. It's a Final Four game and everybody is going to lay it on the line and that's just basketball. It doesn't really matter the location and where we're playing. I think same thing goes for last year's Final Four. We're just trying to win and we're just trying to keep playing with this team. It's awesome that it's at my hometown, but that's not really our focus, our team's focus, my focus. We're all just trying to win, and whatever we have to do to do it, I think we're going to keep doing that.

Yeah, I'm okay.

Q. You guys held Stanford to 4 of 23 from shooting off the three-point line. I was wondering how you held them to that.

PAIGE BUECKERS: I thought we did a really good job of contesting all their open threes. We tried to make sure we had a hand in every single one of their shots because we know all of them can shoot, 1 through 5. So we tried to make it hard for them and made sure every shot they took was contested.

Q. Evina, you guys have been here before in this national semifinal game and have not won. What did the seniors want to do tonight to make this win happen?

EVINA WESTBROOK: As easy as I can put it, we wanted to win the game. But we knew it was going to be a tough one. Stanford is a great team. They put up a great fight. It was a great game. But at the same time, I think in the

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back of our minds we knew what we needed to do to win this game, and I think our defense was the biggest emphasis for us, especially in that second half.

Q. Evina, did this game, was it kind of a microcosm of the whole season in that it was something that had to be pieced together in a different ways and you had to kind of scramble to hold it together down the stretch?

EVINA WESTBROOK: A little bit. I think we've definitely been in these moments, but I think what really prepared us was being in these moments in practice. Coach has done a really good job of setting us up literally 10 seconds or 11 seconds on the clock and we had to get a stop or protect the ball and not turn it over. So moments like that in practice where we did mess up, we didn't mess up over and time and time again, it prepared us for a time like crunch time, and now we have to get it done.

Q. Nika and Paige, how would you characterize the performance of your seniors and the importance it was to you down the stretch?

NIKA MUHL: I mean, our seniors are just doing it all. I feel like -- it's their last year, they're always -- they just want to win, and we're there to follow them. We're listening to them. They're leading us in a great way, and we have one more game, and I'm sure they're going to lead us to that, too.

Q. Geno, you guys have made it to this game the last five years and fallen short, but this year's team, with all you went through, all the adversity, all the injuries, you guys got over the hump again this year. What does it mean to be back in the championship game? And also you're playing South Carolina, I know you probably haven't thought about much yet, but what do you think of the matchup for Sunday?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, you get to a Final Four, it's not easy to win either game. It's not easy to win this one, and it's not easy to win the next one. So I'm always amazed when people -- you've been to five Final Fours in a row and you haven't played in a championship game, your program is falling apart. This is a really, really hard game to win. Stanford is the defending national champions and they have everybody back and they're not playing Sunday night. It's a hard game to win.

Sometimes you don't have to have the best team to win this game, either. Sometimes you just have to play the best that night, and you have to make some big plays in big moments, and you do just enough with what you have. Like you're playing golf but you don't have your A swing, but just scrape it around and get it in the hole the best you

can and then go to the 19th hole and have a drink.

Sometimes you just got to make something out of very little, and with all the things that happened this year -- we make it so hard on ourselves sometimes. As hard as life has made it on us -- which it's the same for everybody, everybody goes through this stuff during the year, everybody loses kids, everybody has injuries, everybody has obstacles and setbacks, every team does. So overcome those. But man, we make it so hard on ourselves that we make it twice as hard as it already is. And hopefully Monday we can just worry about beating South Carolina and not beat ourselves as much. They're going to be impossible to beat just as it is.

Q. With a little over three minutes left in the third quarter, you took both Christyn and Liv out, and you took them out for two and a half minutes or so. When they came back, they scored your next 11 points. Can you talk about how clutch they were down the stretch when you really needed them?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, it started at halftime where we were a little bit out of sync. I thought Liv and Christyn really struggled that whole first half.

You really can't come here as a senior and hope that somebody else wins it for you. That's what you do when you're a freshman sometimes. You can't come to this tournament this weekend as a senior and want it really bad but not understanding this is what I have to do to get it. Evina certainly understood it right from the beginning of the game.

When I took them out in the third quarter, I think they started to sense, like that's it, I'm not getting back in. We're going to try to win it without them.

I don't know that I had any intention of doing that, but Liv with her fouls and Christyn, I thought, could use a breather and get herself back together again, and when they came back in, they looked like different people.

They could have come back in and just played worse, but to their credit, they did exactly what I expect them to do every night. I hope they got one more night in them.

Q. In thinking about what you said in your opening remarks, this is a moment that is so familiar for you in so many ways. But given everything that as you said you've been through this season, does this time feel different?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, a hundred percent. You know, so many years that we've come here we've been a No. 1



seed, so many years we've been to No. 1, No. 1. We had the best team going in, everybody knew it, and it was let's just go do our thing, and I don't think anybody is going to be able to beat us if we play our A game.

This year I didn't think any of that. Coming in, I don't think we're the best team there. I don't think we can win even if we play our A game. We need help -- we need Stanford to not play their best game. We need them to miss shots they normally make.

Yeah, this was completely different. This one -- I've gone into other games at this time and lost and felt a sense of, like -- really it took me a long, long time to get over some of the losses in this particular game.

This one I don't think it would have taken me a long time to get over it because we just gave it everything we had, and I knew that it might not be enough. But fortunately for us, Stanford didn't have their best stuff, and we made a couple big plays, and by some unknown miracle, we're playing Sunday night.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the contributions you got from players that aren't normally mentioned, in particular Nelson-Ododa who kind of changed the momentum of the game early in the fourth quarter with a three-point play and those two free throws. It was a different game after that.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, one of the things we talked about was I don't think it's fair that you guys think Azzi and Paige and E have to make 40 jump shots for us to win tonight. You guys are going to have to do your part. You're going to have to do something. Get them in foul trouble, do something.

When Liv made that three-point play, you could just see her whole body language, everything changed about her, and the two free throws, one was like a bullet, and the other one hit the bottom of the rim and somehow rolled up and went in. There was definitely -- I don't want to say hand of God, but there was definite intervention there for those two to go in.

But I think it gave our players some confidence that we're getting more contributions from more people now, and the three that Christyn made was huge, which we've been waiting the whole game for her to do that.

And then her two free throws, I've got to tell you, I mean, just a lot of little things. A lot of little things that had to go right, and Azzi just keeps making free throws in every big game.

Q. I don't know if you know this, but Sue and Diana hosted an alternate telecast on ESPNU, so they had the game and they were commentating while they brought in guests. It was all a rage on Twitter. Mostly it was them making fun of other people, I think including you at some point. And I just wondered if sometime in the next 48 hours or maybe after the season is over, will you watch it? Did you record it?

GENO AURIEMMA: I didn't record it, and the chances of me watching it are less than zero. (Laughter).

When you've been around those two as long as I have, I really truly have no interest in hearing anything they have to say. (Laughter). On any topic, especially me. (Laughter).

But I'm sure they were funny as hell, and I'm sure whatever I see they were drinking didn't come from the store.

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