

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship Final Four: UConn vs South Carolina

Sunday, April 3, 2022

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Target Center

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Paige Bueckers

Evina Westbrook

Finals Postgame Press Conference

South Carolina 64, UConn 49

GENO AURIEMMA: Obviously when you play in a game like this and you don't win, it's just incredibly difficult. To be in the locker room -- I've been in the other locker room a lot of times, so I know what that feels like, and I've been in this locker room, and I know what that feels like. One team is going to be a national champion and the other team is not.

And I think they deserved it 100 percent. They were the best team all year. The first five minutes I thought they came out and set the tone right then and there for how the game was going to be played.

We were pretty much even the rest of the time, gave ourselves a chance, cut it to five, but we just didn't have enough. I'm proud of our guys just to get here, just to be in this situation, it's just tonight we just didn't have enough. They were just too good for us.

Q. Paige, can you tell me what this weekend was like for you and what you're going through right now?

PAIGE BUECKERS: It was an amazing weekend. Just being able to be here with my team and spend more time with each other, build more memories, and to do it at home was amazing. I mean, nobody in my position would be happy right now, so I'm obviously upset just with the way things ended. Super proud of this team for how far we've come and all the adversity we've dealt with and all we've overcome to get to this point. But at UConn, it's National Championship or nothing, so obviously upset, frustrated, disappointed. Just wish things could have gone different for the seniors.



Q. Evina, you came back you said to be part of something special and take it a step further, and you did to the title game. What's it mean to you to have been part of this team this year, even though you don't get the National Championship?

EVINA WESTBROOK: Definitely not the outcome that we wanted, but I think it was definitely over worth it for me coming back and just being with this group of girls and making the memories that we did. You know, we win together, we lose together, so this definitely hurts, but a lot of memories, a lot of great memories made with this group.

Q. Paige and Evina both, that was an extremely physical game. What did you guys try to do to counter their size advantage and how are you going to recover physically from something like that?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, we knew South Carolina is a very physical team. They rebound the ball extremely well. They defend really well, pressure really well. We just tried to make sure that we were back door cutting and started relieving all the pressure on offense, and just making sure the battle of the boards, nothing comes easy for them. We wanted to box out really well, push the ball in transition to get them running, get them tired. But South Carolina is a great team, they had a great game, and congratulations to them.

EVINA WESTBROOK: Just going off of that, kudos to them. Like Paige said, they're a great team. They played a great game today, and they're really big. Their size is significant, especially against us, and I think they just used that against us tonight.

Q. Paige, you haven't lost often; when you do lose, how do you use it and how do you plan to use this game tonight specifically going forward?

PAIGE BUECKERS: You just try to use every loss as a lesson, try to break down the film, and obviously use it as motivation as a feeling that you don't want to have again.

Obviously every loss is hard to swallow and hard to just



watch again and go through again, so you just want to make sure and do everything that you can in the off-season to prevent that from happening again.

We know -- now we know, last year came up short in the Final Four. But now we know how to get here and how hard it is and how hard we have to work all throughout the season and how much we have to overcome. Just knowing that and the experiences of just being here, you can definitely use it to be better and to win it.

Q. Paige, Coach Auriemma said yesterday you weren't going to play 40 minutes and I think you played 39. It looked like maybe the leg provided some discomfort. How were you feeling throughout the game and how were you able to gut through it?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Great enough to play, so I'm not going to make -- obviously there was fatigue for the whole team, but that's not an excuse at all. Just to play in the National Championship, you've got to give your all, and whatever you have left you've just got to use it. And I wanted to leave nothing on the floor. However much I needed to play, however much I didn't play, the minutes that I went out there I just wanted to give it my all.

Q. Evina, you got subbed out with about a minute left in the first half. Seemed like you rolled your ankle. What happened and did that affect you going forward for the rest of the game?

EVINA WESTBROOK: Yeah, I did, I rolled my ankle, but I wasn't really thinking about it. I know I was limping a little bit, but it was the last game of the season, so whether I rolled it, broke it, I was going to try to play regardless.

Q. I'm curious as to -- as you move forward to the next level in basketball, the type of player that you want to be if you choose to approach the WNBA draft.

EVINA WESTBROOK: Definitely excited for the next step, but I think as of now, I'll have plenty of time to think about that. Right now I'm just focused on being with my team, but definitely excited for what the future holds.

Q. How do you think you'll eventually look back on this team, this season, what you guys went through and what you accomplished?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, like we talked about a little bit in the locker room, it was just a nonstop series of events that we had to keep dealing with. Even today, Liv's groin was all wrapped up from something that happened in the game the other night, and Azzi didn't come to shootaround and she was sick all night and hardly could play.

It just didn't stop all year long. I don't think any of those two things would have mattered the way South Carolina played, but it was just one thing after another after another.

I think it was a remarkable effort by them to stay together as well as they did throughout the entire year, and to be in this game.

But then once you get in this game, you want to win this game. You're not just happy to be here. But I think when this wears off, I think they'll appreciate the effort that it took to get here.

It's another reminder, too, how hard it is to win here. Usually the better team wins when you get here. There's very few upsets in the Final Four.

Q. Paige didn't score until midway through the second quarter. Was South Carolina suffocating her or was she just off?

GENO AURIEMMA: No, I think it was more what they did. We knew that was going to happen, and we tried to set up some scenarios where -- the same thing that we would try to do and know that wherever she went she was going to attract one or two people no matter what. But that that would free up other people to make shots, and that just never materialized.

I don't think from the beginning of the game our offense ever looked like it was in any kind of rhythm, any kind of flow. Then Paige tried to take it upon herself to do -- that never works, when one person is trying to. But their guards completely, I thought, dominated the game on the perimeter and made it really difficult for any of our guys to get any good looks.

Yeah, we usually don't have any problem getting Paige shots, but tonight it was a problem, and I think South Carolina had everything to do with that.

Q. It seemed like early on in the game you guys had played great defense for 20 seconds, you'd deny lay-ups inside, and they'd take a shot and miss and then the offensive rebounds just killed you.

GENO AURIEMMA: We knew that was going to be the deciding factor. We said in the Stanford game the reason we won is because we out-rebounded them and we made our free throws when they counted. We knew tonight that if we didn't hold our own on the boards that it was going to be a really bad night for us, and that's exactly what happened.



You think about -- we had the same number of field goals as they did, but when you offensive rebound you tend to get to the free-throw line, too. They outscored us by 25 from the free-throw line. They were just way more aggressive, way more physical than we were, and I thought that was the game right there.

Q. You mentioned Azzi; how did she rough it out and when did you find out she was ill and how much did that affect your game and the game?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, this morning -- she didn't feel well last night, so we knew it was going to be iffy, and then she couldn't make it to shootaround and then she said she wanted to give it a shot to play.

Obviously it was just one more thing that -- throw it on top of all the other things. As I said, maybe it wouldn't have mattered anyway. South Carolina was that good. You've got to win with what you have.

Q. Coach, you've said for many years, like you said, that to win some things have to go your way, and that wasn't this year. Can you talk about this is the first time you guys have lost a championship game. It's sort of astonishing to go 11-0. Sort of that feeling of that hasn't happened before, but also you mentioned going wire to wire, you know what that feels like, the fact that South Carolina was able to do that this year. If you could address both those things.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I've said this all along. You have to be really good, and you have to be a little bit lucky to win the National Championship. First things first, though, you have to be really good, and you have to be really well balanced and you have to be all the things that South Carolina is. You have to have good guard play. Your big guys have to be able to dominate either at one end or the other. Then you need a little bit of luck.

The 11 times that we won, I would say -- maybe all 11 but at least 10, we had the better team. We played like we were the better team, and we were well balanced and we had all the bases covered and we had everything that you needed to win a championship.

We said when we got here, we're going to need a little bit of help from Stanford on Friday night, and they didn't shoot the ball like they normally do, and we were going to need a little bit of help tonight, and they didn't cooperate.

I told Dawn after the game, they were the best team in the country all year. They were No. 1 in the country in November when we saw them down in the Bahamas, and

they're the best team in the country today.

When you're dealing with that all year long, it's not the easiest thing in the world. So I think her and her staff, they did a magnificent job managing all that and all the expectations that go with that.

Q. You've talked about it many times this season, even tonight when talking about your players, the effort, remarkable is the word you've used. When you zoom out and look at this group of players that you have, how special really is this group?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, when you looked out there, a couple times we had all freshmen and sophomores in the game, I think. For them to again, be in this game was quite an achievement. If you'd have said in November when we left the Bahamas that we would be playing South Carolina tonight, maybe everybody would have said that could possibly happen very easily, right?

But the way it went, I guess if you weren't there, if you didn't see it, if you didn't feel it every day in practice or just who can't go, who can go, it was just a credit to them that they were able to hold it together for that long. We certainly had our ups and downs.

The best way I can say it is I'm really proud of them. But tonight we just weren't good enough. We just weren't good enough.

Q. Jumping off that a little bit, talking about the effort they've shown through adversity, I know it's very early to say, but how are you feeling about who you have going into next season?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it's hard to say each year what could happen. This year was a perfect example of you plan for some things and then all of a sudden your plans get blown up.

I like our chances. Provided we don't have to navigate a season like we did this year, knock on wood, if we stay healthy, I expect to be back here next year.

Q. You guys were down for most of this game, but your guys were playing with so much heart, so much hustle. What kept those motors revving for you guys? What kept the energy going?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, they're competitors. They want to compete. It's easy to compete when you're winning. It's easy to compete when everything is going well. But it's something else when it's a struggle. Everything was a struggle tonight. Everything was a

struggle.

But that's what competition is, right? That's what's at the heart of competing, that you compete even when the chances of winning are slim, when nothing is going your way and you still compete. Otherwise you shouldn't call yourself a competitor.

We've got some competitive kids on our team that, again, we wouldn't be here if they weren't. Today was another example of how competitive they are.

Q. I know you didn't watch, but Diana and Sue's show got rave reviews all Final Four weekend. I wondered, we're in this point where women's basketball is really exploding in popularity and in parity. We have two of the best players in the game in the twilight of their career leading the charge to bring new fans to the game. How important is that, that these two people are trying so hard to make the women's basketball tent bigger?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I had a chance to see them the other night after their show. I've known those two for a long, long time. I can honestly say, with no exaggeration whatsoever, that there's absolutely nothing that they've done since they stepped on campus at UConn until today that has surprised me one bit. They're even better people than they are basketball players, and they're the two best basketball players maybe ever to play in that league, who knows.

The influence that they had when they were in college on the college game and what they've had on the WNBA and the influence they had at the Olympics, that influence isn't going away when they stop playing, because they now are bigger than just two kids playing basketball. They represent something now. They actually represent something they helped create. So I think they're going to water it, nurture it, and take care of it in some way, shape, or form for the rest of their lives, and people are going to gravitate to them because people have gravitated to them since the first day they ever saw them play, and it's still there today.

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