

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Round - Jackson State vs UConn

Friday, March 22, 2024

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Paige Bueckers

Aaliyah Edwards

Media Conference



Q. Having so many freshmen on this team and knowing that this is their first experience with March Madness, what have you been showing them or telling them to get them ready for this moment?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah, we're young, but we don't let that hold us back. I think we've made it this far with the same team, and there's no difference, so I think as a leader, we're just trying to emphasize that it's the same standard that we hold ourselves to. It's just more is at stake.

But that shouldn't change our game. We're still in control of what we can control. Just keep playing how they've been playing. I think they're built for this, and they've been playing fearless, so just stick with it.

Q. Aaliyah, talk a little bit more about the decision. Was it hard to make? Was it difficult? Did it take you a long time to get to this point? How did you go about doing that?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Oh, my gosh, if it was easy I would have made the decision at the start of the season. No, it was a very difficult decision. Everyone can see how special this team is. But behind the scenes they're even more special to me.

I talked to Coach after the Big East, and that's when I told him my decision. But I don't want it to take away from what we have left to do. It's a celebration, so I try to emphasize just how great this program has treated me, how great my teammates and coach have treated me and how special this family is to me, and I want to keep it that way. But we're not done yet. We still have a lot of games to play, and we're still trying to achieve our goal.

Q. Paige, this is going to be the first round sellout in Storrs since 2002. There's been such a buzz around the women's game this year. Can you talk about what that means to you, what you think has led to all of a sudden people kind of discovering women's college basketball and what it means to you guys to be playing in front of a sold-out crowd in the NCAA?

Q. Aaliyah, now that you've made it official that these are going to be your last two games in Storrs, can you talk about your emotions going into the tournament, and is it going to be any different walking out on that court knowing it could be your last time?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah, I think my emotions going into it is the same, just being ready and prepared for the team that we're playing against and what we've got to get done, one game at a time.

But I think I'm going to feel a lot more love than I usually do in Gampel, and I've playing in Gampel for a while now so I feel like the crowd is going to cheer a bit louder. As long as they're cheering for UConn, that's all I can ask for and it's going to feel special, but I just want to stay present and stay in the moment.

Q. Paige, what was it like for you to see Aaliyah's message yesterday and knowing she's taking the next step in her career?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, just like with Nika, obviously I'm coming back, so kind of partly sad but also very partly proud in what she's been able to accomplish her four years here at UConn. Just an attitude full of gratefulness, gratitude for what we've been able to do together, the relationships and bonds that we've built these past four years, and just trying to embrace the rest of the time that we have left and not even think about the fact that they're both leaving.

But just super proud and excited to see what's in store for her.



PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, just seeing the growth even from my freshman year of the respect and love, I think a lot of it is the availability and accessibility, whether it's being on main sports streams like ESPN, FOX, ABC, stuff like that, women's basketball is starting to be on those more, and you see more women's basketball posts on social media, Instagram, Twitter, all that.

Just seeing if you invest in women's sports it goes a long way, and I've always said women's basketball and women's sports have always been great, it's just now more people are getting to notice it and see that. The growth has been huge, and definitely here at UConn they appreciate it and love women's sports, women's basketball. To be able to play in front of Gampel in front of the best fans in the country is always a pleasure.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I would also just add to that that I think that we're all just happy to be a part of the shift and to continue to push the shift towards people just betting on women. It's important to us student-athletes but more importantly it's important for the next generation.

Q. Aaliyah, how are you physically, and will you be wearing the mask, and how is having gone through that last year going to help you if you are?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I'm doing well physically. Yes, I will be wearing the mask. It's going to make an appearance again. But moving forward, I've worn it before, so I'm more used to it now. But yeah, I'm not going to let it distract me or anything like that. I'm still the same player, same teammate. Just going to do what we do best, which is win and go out there and put out for UConn.

Q. I'm wondering since you've declared to go to the WNBA, how much conversation have you had with family and friends back in Canada and how has the reaction been from them?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah, shout out Canada. Yeah, a lot of love back home. Definitely they said that they're going to tune into us and follow us along in the tournament. I'm feeling the love and support.

Yeah, my family was a huge factor in helping me make this decision. They've supported me for four years here and will support me forever. Shout-out to them and also my Canadian family. I wouldn't be here without them. Humble beginnings for sure, but I think that I'm going to make even more memories in my next chapter.

Q. From a basketball standpoint, what have you been focusing on in practice the last few weeks to be ready

for the rest of the postseason?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Just tightening up on the little things, continuing to hone in on what we're good at and keep practicing that but also what we need to focus on moving forward and our weaknesses and what teams are going to try to exploit. I think rebounding, defending, communications are huge things we're working on these past couple weeks, but again, just looking at the film from the Big East Tournament and seeing what we needed to improve on and really focusing on that and continuing to build championship habits and practice, and yeah, just honing in on the little things.

Q. For both of you, obviously you guys have gone through a lot of injuries this year and now you're down to basically playing six players for most of the game. Can you talk about your rest this last week and preparing for this and how much have the coaches emphasized staying out of foul trouble?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I think the whole season we've tried to balance work and rest, managing our loads, and the training staff, strength and conditioning staff and the coaches have all worked together in that of trying to do a very good job of trying to balance it as best we can. But heading into the tournament it's win or go home. You play every game like it's your last and try to keep competing for 40 more minutes. That's all we're really focused on.

But again, just trying to make sure we don't overdo it but also not taking too much rest in that we have a lot to prepare for and a lot to be ready for. I guess just kind of balancing those things.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah, it's obvious I think that with limited players and not as deep of a bench as we would have hoped for, that's one of the factors that we need to take into consideration coming into these upcoming games.

But I think that we'll do all right. We've just got to stay more disciplined in the things we're trying to execute, and I think as we said, this past two weeks or so we've just trying to be intense, staying intense and staying locked in but also just playing smart. We've got to play hard, but it's the smartness that's going to help us go far.

Q. Aaliyah, in your post yesterday you said that UConn has made you ready and prepared for the next step. Can you elaborate on that and what this program does to help people go into that next career?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I mean, this program is built for pros. It trains you to be a pro from early on, and it



challenges you. I think that's the biggest thing that a lot of people don't understand with UConn. Even though Coach has all his accolades and Coach has created so much success for the program, for the players, I think the one thing with the players, it's a challenge and it's a grind all the way through.

At the end of the grind, in the moment you may not see what's at the end of the light, but I feel like, as I said in the post, I feel ready and I feel like Coach prepared me, my teammates have prepared me, and I just feel mentally, physically, emotionally just ready.

As I said before, I don't want this to kind of pull us back from what we have left to do, but yeah, I'm excited for the next chapter, and I feel ready to go.

Q. Aaliyah, being on the sideline for the Big East Tournament and watching Paige do what she did but knowing that she's also done that all season, what's impressed you the most about how she's been able to pick up from where she left off this year and if anything really elevate her game even more?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: The one thing about Paige that I love is just I think she doesn't let anything steer her off. She's just always locked in. She always knows what she wants to do, how she's going to get it and who she's going to bring along the way to help her do it. I think she's built for March. I think that just as a leader she just knows how to close out games, what we need to hear as a team in the moment, and what we need of her and what we need to do to help her out at the same time.

But I think she just leads by example, and the energy and the competitiveness that she expresses, we all just pick up on it.

I'm going to miss playing alongside that because it's hard to find a teammate like that. Even coming in from freshman year together and not playing as much games as we wanted to and as many years as we wanted to, but I think that she's built for this month, and she's built for this team. She's going to lead UConn to many more wins.

Q. Geno, with such a short bench going into the NCAA Tournament, what have you been talking to them about in terms of being able to stay fresh and being able to stay out of foul trouble and all the things that go with only having this many players?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it's funny because what we talk to our team about and what we talk about among ourselves as a coaching staff sometimes can be two completely different things. We talk to our team about how we've got

all the pieces in place. We have everything that we need. We just need to try to recreate another weekend like last weekend. Obviously different competition that we haven't seen before and different stakes. For some of our older guys, which is three of them, it's not anything that they haven't experienced before, and trying to give them as much confidence as possible going in, to the younger guys, obviously.

Among ourselves and the coaches, hey, look, we have one way to win. If that way doesn't work, we're screwed, and early vacation. We have limited ways of winning games that we have to be great at the one or two things that we are really, really good at and we have to maximize those things and limit all the other things that can be going against us.

Q. You mentioned the seniors that you do have. What do you need to see from them over the next few weeks to get to where you think you guys can go, and on the flipside of that, how do you hope that they can help the freshmen kind of move along and do what they need to do at the same time?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, our seniors, they've got to play a role that is both within the control of who they are -- they've just got to be who they are, and then they've also got to play the role of putting up a front that if they're struggling with something, they can't let the younger guys know that we're struggling. They've got to keep a certain level.

I think the scoring, the rebounding, the leadership, the defense, all those things that those three are capable of doing, they're going to do. There's no doubt in my mind. They're going to do it.

I always go into every season, and maybe this is a new season, with the understanding that we have to win this with our veterans, and if the younger guys contribute, then that makes it that much easier to accomplish our goal, but we can't go in thinking, well, if our three seniors really struggle, the other guys will pick it up. It's not fair -- that's not to say it can't happen, but it's not fair.

As far as the younger guys -- we're not mentioning any names. There's four of them. They range from the NCAA Tournament, what's that, to delusional, I can win a National Championship by myself, so that run that gamut, all four of them. So it'll be interesting to see which one of them shows up.

Q. Can you just talk a little bit about Aaliyah's decision that she made yesterday?

GENO AURIEMMA: Nothing that was unexpected, to be honest with you. There's only been actually two conversations that I've had with Aaliyah about this. One was a while back when it was brought to my attention that she might consider coming back. So I talked to her about it and gave her all the pros and cons, and at the end of the day I said it's going to be your comfort level, and whichever way you go, obviously we'll be fine with it.

But I always thought it was a real, real long shot because -- I think there is a cycle in college basketball. You spend four years someplace, you give it -- same thing Nika said. You pretty much pour everything you have into it, and then it's time to move on and go on to the next phase of your life. Nika's reason for doing it may have been different than Aaliyah's. I don't think Nika is going to be a top 5, 6 or 7 draft pick, so her reasons may be different for going. And Paige's situation is different for staying.

I think everyone did what I thought they would do. Let's put it that way. None of them surprised me.

Q. Jackson State plays almost double what you guys play with in terms of available bodies. What do you see from them that really impresses you so far?

GENO AURIEMMA: The interesting thing is you don't get to see much of some of the teams you're going to play in the NCAA Tournament, so there's this, first of all, this misconception that because you never hear of them and you never see them, well, how can they be any good.

Obviously we've never subscribed to that, and then watching them play, you can see why they've dominated that league and why they're so well-coached and how hard they play. The things that they do are the things that make it difficult to play against. It doesn't matter whether you're in their league or whether they're the non-conference games that they've played.

Yeah, this is the reason you want to be a No. 1 seed, so you don't get this matchup in the first round. I always say later in the season, I don't care what seed we are, we just want to get in. Well, that's a bunch of crap because you're trying to avoid this game in the first round because they're good.

Q. I was going to ask you that. They have a 6'6" post player. Just automatically that makes things interest, right? That's one of the things that Aaliyah has to handle and not get in foul trouble. Like you said, it complicates the whole thing.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it does. It does. And a lot of times the NCAA Tournament is truly about the matchups

that you get. Each coach probably sits down and looks at the bracket and says, all right, here's the 16 teams in our bracket. We're going to have to play six of them. Here's the six we want to play, because they fit their matchups perfectly.

The chances of that ever happening are zero. So you're going to run into situations where you're going to have to deal with something that's not your strength, and obviously size is not our strength. So that does pose a problem immediately.

Their depth -- there are things you're going to come across. They rebound the ball hard. They get it out in transition. They just -- they're undefeated in their league for a reason.

One of the things that I like to ask when we're getting ready to play in the NCAA Tournament and we're playing somebody we've never seen before, I always ask, so how do they win, and then when they tell you how they win, it makes it sound like they're the favorite to win a National Championship.

Then a lot of times when you say, how do they lose, and then they list 15 things why a team loses. I asked our guys, so why do they lose, and they said, well, they don't lose in their tournament, and every game they did lose early on, it was a really tough game.

You can tell a lot about a team's losses almost more than you can tell about their wins. This is complicated tomorrow. This is complicated.

Q. The portal opened before the tournament even began and I think there's a crazy number, like 570 players in it right now. Several coaches have talked about how it's not that much fun anymore with these new rules. Do you expect there to be a lot of turnover in coaching because it's just become so different, and how do you deal with --

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah.

Q. -- preparing for the tournament and keeping an eye on the portal and NIL --

GENO AURIEMMA: I love the people that do TV or media or sit up there holier than thou advocating for how the student-athletes have been punished all these years and they're actually indentured servants and they should stop being treated as such. If any of them ever got a coaching job, they would flip 180 degrees immediately.

Yeah, talking about playing tomorrow's game is complicated, this whole thing is complicated, and it's gotten

more complicated because the adults in the room don't know how to fix it, and every decision they make is wrong. So you're left to deal with it.

Any one of those things, NIL, the portal, would have been a challenge for most coaches in the country. Putting the two of them together and having to navigate both of those things, and for all those people out there and coaches included that say, well, you just have to adapt, all right, so if it's so easy to adapt, why are so many coaches so quick to get out all of a sudden at an age when you don't see people get out at that age.

Not only are players deciding I've had it with this school, coaches are deciding I've had it with this profession. It's not about I can't adapt or I can't -- it's those two things combined, the portal and the NIL, left to its own devices the way it is, is not only going to hurt the coaching profession and people are going to get out -- first of all, it's killed the high school recruiting because why would you recruit a high school kid when you can recruit a college kid. Second of all, it's killed every mid major in America who have now become junior colleges, so to speak, because as soon as they develop a good player, that player is leaving.

Then at the high majors, it's costing you money to get the kid there and it's costing you money to keep the kid there, and it's costing you more money to make sure they don't leave. So no one is skating through this scenario going, yeah, I've got this figured out. Nobody. Not the players, not the coaches, not anybody has it figured out. That's unfortunate. But that's the world that has been created for us as coaches and the players as players.

Unless somebody gets a grip of it and puts some guidelines around it, it's only going to get worse.

The last thing I would say, the unintended consequences of all this is that's 500 Division I players in the portal after four or five days. What do you think is going to happen after this tournament? How many more are going in?

You've got until May 11 I think it is, something like that. So there's a long way to go between now and then.

How many of all these kids that get in when the musical chairs stop have no chair to sit in, and they're in actually a worse situation than they think they're in right now. No one talks about that. They should be free to go wherever they go. Good. But what they don't understand is that school is free to not take you, and you're stuck.

All of this is unfortunate the way it's played out.

Q. With Aaliyah's announcement yesterday, I'm

wondering if you are able to reflect on a more overarching on her four years of development and growth at UConn.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, Aaliyah coming out of high school, I remember watching her intently at the NBA Academy. They had it at the Final Four actually. I think we were in Tampa. Ironically, she and Nika were roommates.

But watching her play was just this young, competitive, run up and down hard every possession, and obviously very impressive, but needed, like most kids that age, to kind of harness all that and develop certain basketball skills, and over the four years, she's been able to add something each and every year that she's been here.

Her competitiveness is still way above average. Her athletic ability, her toughness is way above average.

Learning how to play against players where she's undersized probably gets her ready for the next level because that's what's going to happen a lot at the next level, and it's unfortunate that we've not been able -- this goes for Nika and Paige, as well, that we've not been able to surround these three seniors with an entire team almost the entire four years that they've been here.

Aaliyah has had to work under much more trying situations than most players would have had to, and I think she's been unbelievably consistent. When you've had to do it by yourself so long, it's wearing, and she's managed to just be great for us every night. She has no choice really. She has to be great.

Q. Geno, knowing how the freshmen have contributed, I want to ask about cadence in particular. What kind of progress do you think she's made? How do you see her, what she needs to do in the off-season looking ahead, and just the role she's kind of filled. I asked her to look up Vinny Johnson from the Detroit Pistons, the microwave sort of thing --

GENO AURIEMMA: You don't need to encourage her to do that.

Well, Jamelle said this yesterday. She just looked at me and she was smiling a little bit, and she said, Coach, you saw something in her during recruiting, and whatever that was, you still keep seeing it in her, and she keeps showing you that the things you saw are really, really there. She's a gamer. She's competitive. She's not shy about shooting the ball. She finishes instinctively around the basket way different than anybody other than Paige on our team. She's long. She's got a toughness about her.

At some point in her life she will -- what's the easy way to say it? She will come to understand that not every shot is a great shot just because you have the ball in your hands, that there are times when it's best not to shoot it. I didn't want to say that earlier in the year, and we're probably going to have to live with those in the tournament because some are going to go and some are not going to go.

So for the summer, understanding what that is is going to be a big key, and then be even better with the ball when you don't shoot it. I think that's the next thing for her. Be better with the ball when you don't shoot it. Be better with where you're going on the dribble, be better with where you're going with the pass. I expect her to do that.

Q. I'm just wondering if you saw Shea's win on Sunday and what she's done so far at Vanderbilt.

GENO AURIEMMA: She was complaining that getting in -- might have to be in a play-in game, oh, my God, I hope I don't have to go here, all the things that coaches obsess about. I reminded her that just getting in in her second year was already a huge accomplishment and she could coach at Vanderbilt the rest of her life just for doing that because it's been so long since that feeling has happened at Vanderbilt.

No surprise that they won, and won't be a surprise if they win the next one. I don't even know who they play. But it won't be a surprise to me. Because there's a style of play that they have. She and Tom -- Tom brought a lot of his stuff that he was doing, and Shea brought a lot of stuff that she's been doing, and that match, I think, has been terrific for them, and they have an identity, they have a style, and those are two very, very competitive people, Shea and Tom, and they've passed that down to their team. Their team is super competitive.

It doesn't usually happen that fast. They won their first NCAA Tournament game. I texted her and I said, I'm jealous; it took until our third try for us to win our first game, and both of those were home that we lost.

I'm super proud of her. I can't say enough about the job that she's done.

They're in our bracket, aren't they. Not in ours, they're in Portland. They are? Is there a chance we would play them if we keep winning? All right, I hope we play them then. Hell yeah. I hope we play them. I'm going to be rooting for her until then.

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