

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

Saturday, March 23, 2024

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

UConn Huskies

Geno Auriemma

Coach

Paige Bueckers

Ashlynn Shade

Media Conference

Connecticut 86, Jackson State 64

MODERATOR: Joining us from UConn, head coach, Geno Auriemma. Student-athletes Paige Bueckers and Ashlynn Shade. The format will be as follows: Opening statement from Coach. We'll then move to questions for the student-athletes followed by questions for coach. Please wait for the microphone. State your name and affiliation before your question. Also please silence your cell phones and any recording of this press conference is prohibited.

I'll be remiss if I didn't wish Coach happy birthday. Coach, the floor is yours.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you. Uh, you know, from a coaching perspective, it's been like this from the very, very first NCAA Tournament ever that we played in. You can just wait -- leading up to the game is extricating because all the things that run through your head about did we do a good job scouting these guys. Did we do a good job? We don't know enough about them. La, la, la, la, la. We're going to take them -- there are so many things that go through your head. I don't care whether it's this year, you're a three seed and you're undefeated. In 1995 when we were getting ready to play Maine in the first round and you're scared to death that something's going to happen, so I'm thrilled that this one's out of the way and it's over with. Obviously these two and Aaliyah were just magnificent. That's what you need.

We talked a lot about it before I think yesterday. We said if Ash makes a couple threes tomorrow, if Nika makes a couple maybe, then we're going to be fine. If those guys



have trouble making shots, it's going to be a long day for us. Obviously, you know, these two did what they're good at and Aaliyah did what she's good at and if we can keep that up, then we're going to be okay.

MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes? Right here on the left, fourth row, Lori.

Q. Lori Riley, Hartford courant. Ashlynn, could you talk a little bit about playing in your first tournament game and was everything just going right for you tonight?

ASHLYNN SHADE: It was definitely really exciting. I had a lot of nerves and this anxious feeling before the game, when I went to bed, when I woke up. But, no, to step out on the court and going through the starting lineup, to hear how loud our crowd was, I just felt like it was a dream. It was such a surreal moment to be out there. It was just really exciting.

MODERATOR: Question up front from Pat.

Q. Paige, can you just talk about winning this game on your coach's birthday. I assume that was a big emphasis for you guys not to let one go on his birthday and what it means and what he means to you guys.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah. It's a lot better feeling when you win it, especially on a special day for him, you want it to be a special day. I know if we lost it would no longer be a special day. So to get this one, especially on his day is really huge, but to continue to keep advancing in the tournament and Coach is everything for all of us. He's like our grandpa. (Laughter) But, no, I've learned so much under him, we're all learned so much under him but it's not just stuff on the basketball court, it's stuff as human beings. He has our back even though some days it might not feel like it, but he'll have our back for anything, anything we need in life, he'll always be there and it's just a real -- sometimes like tough-love relationship especially with me, but just, I cherish our relationship so much and I know I can count on him for whatever, whenever I want to go chat, go to his office, just literally talk about nothing and it'll be a



great time.

But we're super grateful to everyone who commits here comes to play for him, so super grateful and happy birthday, grandpa. (Laughter)

MODERATOR: We'll go to Griffin, fourth row on the left.

Q. Griffin, Newhouse Sport at Syracuse. Paige, what was it like for you to be back on the floor in this March Madness setting?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Super exciting along with what Ash was saying, just a lot of nerves, a lot of anxious, ready to go. We haven't played for about two weeks so just ready to get the games rolling and definitely during the most important part of the season. Just excited to be back out there on the court with my teammates.

MODERATOR: Second row on the right, Emily?

Q. Emily Adams, Hartford Courant. Ashlynn, when you had that first steal and score and the and one, we saw the reaction from you and the team. Just what was that moment like and when did you feel like you really sort of settled into this game today?

ASHLYNN SHADE: Definitely after that play I felt like I was settled in. I was just going to let the game come to me. I wasn't going to overthink it, which I typically do sometimes, but, no, today I was like after that play I felt like I was finally ready to go. It was just exciting to just score on that being my first bucket of the game. Really gets you involved. So it was exciting.

MODERATOR: Third row on the right, Maggie.

Q. Maggie, CT Insider. Paige, sort of on that same note, what was it like to see Ashlynn, just so much rise up especially in that third quarter in her first tournament game?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, it was amazing. It's what she and the other freshmen have been doing the entire season so to come out in a huge stakes game, March Madness game where it's win or go home and perform like that on your first time on the stage is really huge, especially getting confidence in what you want to continue to do the rest of the way. So, her being aggressive, we need it. Her looking for a shot, we need it. So for her to do it and come out with as much confidence as she did tonight was huge.

MODERATOR: On the left, front row, Vicki.

Q. Vicki from the New London Day. Ashlynn, you

talked about this a little coming into the tournament I think yesterday maybe. What was March Madness like growing up in Indiana? What is this tournament like to you, like Paige has talked about watching it since she was a little kid. I'm sure you did also.

ASHLYNN SHADE: Oh, yeah, it's huge in Indiana since we're such a basketball state, especial like how my family embraces it so much. I've grown up watching March madness since I was little. It's a big deal in my family, we are super competitive with it, like making brackets and everything. This year's a little different because I'm actually here now, but, no, it's so surreal to actually finally be part of it just because you watch it on TV for so long and you watch games all day long but to actually be playing in a March Madness game is super cool.

MODERATOR: We'll go fourth row on the right.

Q. Natalie with The Next. To address the elephant in the room, can you just talk about the shirts you're wearing? (Laughter) Who designed those? Did you get to pick the pictures on the shirt you're wearing? Just tell me as much as you can about those shirts.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, my shirt we were headed up to Big East Media Day and my man needed a nap, so he just -- (Laughter) Kind of took a snooze and I took a flick, so. We all picked them. Ash, you can explain yours.

ASHLYNN SHADE: I think this shirt sums up Coach's relationship with me. This is what he looks like most of the time on the court. (Laughter) But when he yells at me, I'm just starting to translate into I love you instead of you suck. (Laughter) But, so when he goes you suck. I'm just like, ugh, love you, too.

GENO AURIEMMA: You need a new translator.

MODERATOR: Any other questions? We're going to go to Zoom. We have a question from Brad on Zoom. Brad, go ahead. Maybe not. Sorry, Brad. Brad, you there?

Q. Yes, ladies, how are you and congratulations on the win. That offensive spark in the first quarter when you went on the 17-0 run, after that what was your mindset and how that would play out for the rest of the game?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I think after that run, we just wanted to continue to keep our foot on the gas, don't let up. We also know basketball's a game of runs, so staying present in that we want to continue to keep going on this run and not let Jackson State go on a run, but we know that every single game during this time everybody's playing for their



lives, so nobody's going to give up. Nobody is just going to ease off the throttle so just continue to play our game and continue to do what got us on that run and just staying focused and staying in the moment.

MODERATOR: We have time for one more here. No more questions. Ladies, thank you very much.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Thank you.

MODERATOR: Questions for coach? Up front.

Q. Geno, you talked a little bit about it in your opening statement, but to have this team get off on that kind of a run and then to have Ashlynn get her start the way she did, how important was it for you guys to make a statement early in this one and just to get the confidence of this team up early?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, if you remember, it wasn't that long ago, obviously, the Providence game, the first game of the Big East Tournament, it takes a little bit of time to get yourself acclimated into the game. Sometimes the other team is going to react to whatever's going on. So if you're struggling and they get a little bit confident and they feel really good about how they can attack you and how they can guard you, it has a way of impacting the game, but when you start off the way we did, and Paige, when she starts off like that, it makes everybody feel a lot more confident. They can breathe a little bit easier knowing that she's pretty much taken control of the game.

And Aaliyah, we weren't sure how she was going to react with the mask back on and whether or not she was going to be able to feel comfortable with all the contact that was going to happen. When I saw how physical she was rebounding the ball and outside of her area, that's when I knew we were okay. Paige was being aggressive. Aaliyah was being assertive and I thought we're going to be okay because those two things are kind of what drives us.

And we always need one more player to step up. If it's a couple players, obviously it's a big, big win for us, but, you know, Ash, that's what she does. She scores points and she's comfortable doing it. I was really worried because, you know, her and KK, I think they put a lot of pressure on themselves to be really, really good and I was hoping that it wouldn't backfire on them, but, you know, that was huge. The two of them playing like that.

MODERATOR: Questions for coach? Emily, second row.

Q. Geno, with Paige, seeing her back on the floor in the tournament, did you expect her to kind of make the statement that she did today with her first post-season

double-double, all of that and just kind of what was it like to see her back in form?

GENO AURIEMMA: Um, I pulled her aside yesterday and we talked a little bit and I said I need to talk to you. And she said, okay. I said what do you think I'm going to talk to you about? She said that I have to take over the tournament. That I have to do what I did in the Big East Tournament and I have to make sure that I'm everything that my team needs me to be. So she kind of said it for me, you know, and that's when I knew that it means a lot to her because being in the tournament, coming off an injury and then being in a tournament missing a whole year. Those are her last two tournament experiences. I know that this was a big, big deal for her. Because, you know, she's a forgotten entity in the country, you know? I think maybe she reminded everybody that she's still pretty good.

And the thing that needs to be said, too, is playing a team like Jackson State, they compete really, really, really, really hard and they seem to get energized even more, the more you score, the more they want to keep playing and they never feel like we're out of it and we should just pack it in. I was really impressed with them. I think they're exceptionally well-coached and their big kid, we didn't know, okay, maybe she'll -- I told her after the game, too, she played fantastic. She had a great game. Yeah, they were good. We had to play good. We had to shoot a great. If we don't shoot a great, that's your scoop going into Monday. If we don't shoot a great, we'll have a hard time winning.

MODERATOR: Vicki, front row on the left.

Q. Geno, for Ashlynn to have that good of a game in her first NCAA Tournament game and then, like the way she was in here, this is the most confident that she's been all year maybe. Is that a really great game for her?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah. Yeah, her confidence is back. She lost it for a while, but it's come back. I've always said when you're a really good player and you're a really good shooter, I have to be more like Paige. You have to be slightly delusional and think you'll never miss a shot and if you do miss it, it's the gods conspiring against you. It's not your fault and you should never get down on it and maybe some of that is wearing off on Ash, but she certainly didn't play like a freshman today. And she actually played better today than she has at any practice this week leading up to the game. So, figure that one out.

MODERATOR: Questions for Coach? On the right.

Q. Wilson Jackson, HBCU Gameday. Coach, you



talked about in this press conference about the need for you guys to make shots and so you get a win like this, what was your message to Coach Reed after the game, especially with the way that women's college basketball is changing and the parity that's forming in between different programs?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I wanted to commend her on her season, you know, going undefeated in your league. I don't care what league you play in, I don't care who you play against. You play 18 conference games and you win them all and you win your conference tournament, that's a hell of a job and it's not like the first time, right? She's been doing this for quite some time now there and a lot of these coaches that work like that and have tremendous success and put together great teams and put together a terrific program, nobody knows about them. They certainly don't get on TV enough. They certainly don't get enough recognition and I wanted to let her know that and that I wanted to put myself out there for her and I think we need coaches like her to be celebrated and bigger schools need to not keep recycling coaches that are let go by other power five schools, whatever you want to call them. They should start looking outside the box a little bit because there's a lot of great coaches out there, and she's one of them.

MODERATOR: We have time for two more. We'll go to Zoom, Rob Knox, what's your question?

Q. Hey, coach, how you doing? Happy birthday.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you.

Q. In line with that question, I was going to ask you the same thing. One of the things -- I write The Next and I covered the MEAC and SWAC this year and one of the things, you've played your share of MEAC and SWAC schools over this years. Lately those programs have started rise, as you mentioned, but there's always still that lack of respect for those conferences and their schedules and different things. In your opinion, what could be done to maybe help elevate them gaining respect more from maybe the committee in regards to seeding and/or just opportunities?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, I know what you're saying. I do think they suffer from the same thing that a lot of mid-major schools suffer, getting people that are at a high level, getting them to want to play you. It's really, really hard to put together a schedule when you're in their situation because everybody just wants you to come that to their place and they'll pay you some money to come there but they'll never come to your place and play and that's really difficult to get your net -- whatever the hell they're using

today, to get yourself to that point and then the teams in your league are suffering the same situation that you're in, so they always play on the road against the best teams, probably lose, and then the reputation is, well, they're good in their league but they don't compete nationally. And yet I think Jackson State and some of the other programs have proven that they can go on the road and compete. Maybe not win, but they can certainly compete. I think getting a 14 seed when I remember when we were a number one seed a lot of times, we played schools from that league as a 16, so I think being a 14, maybe there is some understanding of, hey, these guys deserve it a little more than a team that, you know, won't go out there and play anybody or a team that finishes with a losing record in their own conference that gets a six seed or a seven seed. So people get rewarded for being in the right conference, by being born a certain way, they get rewarded and teams that are trying to really, really work really hard to build this competitive schedule don't get enough rewards and maybe this is the start of it, 14. It's not great, but I wonder how they would have done if they didn't have to play us here in front of this environment against the kind of team that we have right now. Maybe next year we'll find out.

MODERATOR: Time for one more. All right, Coach, thank you.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you, all.

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