

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - vs UConn

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Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

UConn Huskies

Nika Mühl

Aaliyah Edwards

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Question here on the right.

Q. Aaliyah, this one's for you. You and Paige combined for over half the points yesterday, whether they were scored or assisted. What is the synergy like and that dynamic, what does that feel like to play with her in that way?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: It feels great. And I think the beauty of that is just -- we just read off of each other. And us being in sync helps the whole team be in sync as well. And it's not only us two that can win the game for UConn. It comes down to the five on the court at the time in the moment.

But I think going back to, as seniors when we're leading the pack and we're really moving efficiently and moving with confidence, moving with intention, that really helps lead us into making the right decisions on both ends of the court.

THE MODERATOR: Question up front, Vickie. Microphone's coming.

Q. Nika, last year when you broke the single-season assist record and you talked about how astonishing it was to pass Sue Bird. Now on the all-time list you've passed some amazing people, Diana, and hopefully tomorrow you would be number one all time. Can you just reflect on that a little bit? Is it still kind of -- I mean, it's happening, so you're not, like, sitting home, like, you know, counting. But is it pretty amazing to you?

NIKA MÜHL: I feel like, you know, whenever I get asked those questions, it's really hard to put into words what it feels like because I haven't really done it yet. So, I mean, yes, I'm there. I feel like I'm going to do it. But I don't think I can have the full answer and the full, like, aspect -- I guess, like, the full feeling emotions that are going to be behind it.

I mean, I don't think anybody's expected me to be in the conversation when it comes to things like that. When I came here, I don't think I expected that of myself either.

THE MODERATOR: Joining us from UConn, student-athletes Nika Mühl and Aaliyah Edwards. We'll go right into questions. Please state your name and affiliation and wait for the microphone. First question. Right here on the left.

Q. I guess for both of you, having Paige back, you know, it's been big for the team. Obviously, last year she was out with the ACL. What's it been like to have her back and what's the impact she's made, you know, just around the whole team?

NIKA MÜHL: I feel like -- I feel like especially, you know, now starting the NCAA tournament where the pressure is greater, every game matters a lot more. Every little thing you do is -- I wouldn't say it's going to decide if you win the game or not, but it's going to decide if you win a game or not.

I feel like it means so much, just looking back at last year's NCAA tournament, it just feels -- I don't know. I personally feel more secure having her on the floor. Knowing that whenever you pass her the ball, she's going to do something great with it, just like it's been the whole season, but especially now when it matters so much more, it's huge. And you can definitely feel the difference in our team.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I think also we're just confident, like, the three of us trying to lead this team and trying to achieve what we want to do in this tournament. And I think having all three of us do our role, do our part together it what's helped the team throughout the whole season. But I think it's going to be, as Nika said, more crucial in the tournament.



So I feel like being just among those names is very humbling for me. And those are some people that I looked up to when I was younger and wanted to mimic my game towards. And I would say just very, very humbling. But I feel like I can tell you more once I do it, so...

THE MODERATOR: Right here, front row, Lori.

Q. This is for Nika. Can you just talk a little bit about the matchup tomorrow between the guards. Obviously, Fair is very good, and just curious what you guys are going to have to do to kind of try to stop her.

NIKA MÜHL: Yeah. I mean, I feel like, you know, obviously, we have a lot of respect for their whole team, especially for her. You know, she's their leader. She's going to have the ball most of the times. But I feel like throughout my four years here, we've faced a lot of teams like that that are very guard dominant. And, you know, they have that one player that the ball is going to go to, and everybody's going to look at her.

So I feel like it never comes down to one player guarding. I feel like it's always a team defense that wins against players and teams like that. So, I mean, just focusing on what they're trying to do, where they're trying to get the ball to. I feel like we have a good defensive plan. I mean, it's going to come down to, you know, team defense.

And I feel like a lot has to do also with rebounding, not letting them get those second shots. And it's not just on our big guys to do that. It's on us guards to, you know, box out and help them because they've been bailing us -- our big guys have been bailing us out when it comes to that the whole season. So I feel like that's going to be if not the most important thing tomorrow, rebounding, so...

THE MODERATOR: We'll stay on the left, third row.

Q. Aaliyah, you know, sort of building off that rebounding, Syracuse is one of the best offensive rebounding teams in the nation. What are you guys looking to do defensively to grab those boards and limit Syracuse from getting those second-chance opportunities?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Boxing out every time we get pretty much out, getting more boards than they get. But as Nika said, like, that's the game plan. It's not really about how we're going to go about it. It's just about going out there and doing it.

THE MODERATOR: Question up front, Vickie.

Q. Did you guys scrimmage them in October, and did you learn anything from that about Syracuse that you can take into the matchup tomorrow?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah, we did scrimmage them in October. And, yeah, we can look at film of that. But also I feel like as much as we say that we've changed from October, they have as well. So we just take into consideration how we matched up well and how we didn't match up well against them during that scrimmage.

But how also they've tuned out some of the weaknesses that they had during that time and how much they've grown as a team. So we can't really look too far back into the past but look at their recent games and see how we can convert.

THE MODERATOR: Let's stay on the left here, third row.

Q. Yeah, just sort of building off that, what have you guys seen from Syracuse that's most different from when you faced off against them last time? And just overall what do you expect them to do offensively?

NIKA MÜHL: I feel like we are not so much focused on what they are going to do. I feel like we're mostly focused on what we are going to do against them. Defensive-wise, offensive-wise, as Aaliyah said, you know, teams that you face off in September are never going to be the same as teams that you face off in March.

And, I mean, said to that, in March teams are always different. You know, they go harder. They hustle harder. They realize that this might be our last time stepping on the court. So just the overall vibes is different. And I don't think it's going to be so much about strategy or, like, you know comparing them to what they were in, like, in September and stuff like that.

I feel like it's going to be a hustle game. It's going to be a very physical game. I feel like it's going to come down to who's going to get those loose balls, rebounds. I don't think it's going to be so much strategy, so...

THE MODERATOR: Question on the left here, third row.

Q. How do you guys feel the crowd plays a role when you guys playing here at home in the first two rounds of the NCAA tournament?

NIKA MÜHL: I mean, that's our sixth man. I mean, since I've been here, it's been -- except COVID year -- but it's been incredible having them on our side. And, you know, as much as you love to play away games and, you know, playing in those type of environments, there's nothing like

playing at home, and especially in Gampel. And it's special knowing that this is going to be our last game in Gampel. I feel like it brings some more motivation to go out, you know, the way that we want to go out and, you know, leave these people with something.

So, yeah. I mean, it's incredible. Just hearing them be so loud, clear on us. Especially now that we don't really have a lot of players, they're definitely you know making sure that adrenaline is always pumping us in our bodies and just, I don't know. It's just different. It's the best thing that we could ask for to, you know, play at home and have this type of an environment because there's nothing like it in the nation, so...

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to the back left corner.

Q. Nika, is there a guard that you sort of -- or two that you look at that are similar to Dyaisha that you guys sort of played this year, or is there anything that she does that's unique?

NIKA MÜHL: I wouldn't -- it's really hard. I feel like I would say -- I would say a guard that she's kind of similar to that we played this year, a guard from St. John's. What's her name?

AALIYAH EDWARDS: I don't remember her last name.

NIKA MÜHL: Yeah, I can't remember her name, but I feel like people definitely know her. I feel like she's very similar to Dya. You know, she has the ball -- yeah, Unique Drake, Unique Drake. I feel like she's kind of similar to her in terms of being aggressive, smart guard. Just very shifty, very, you know, aggressive in the lane, can shoot from, you know, behind the arc.

So, again, it's not the same player. Every player's different. Every player's unique. But I would say that's a very similar matchup that we've had this year, so, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions? We're going to go front row, Vickie.

Q. Aaliyah, can you talk about Nika's assists? You've been here to see all of them, so what have you thought about all her passes?

(Laughter)

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Yeah. I mean, I just said that I know she's one from tying it. And I think that she's going to drop 10 tomorrow, so I'd love to see that for her.

But just the player that she is. She's a selfless player.

She'll look for the open man and look to make the open play first before she knocks down the three. But, you know, as recently this year, she's been contributing in different ways. So just to see how far she's grown and how far her game has grown in that aspect.

But, you know, I always love the lob passes that she be giving me because, you know, it's a good feeling when your PG be finding you. But, no. It's always just fun when Nika's on the court with us and to have some of her no-look passes and some of the crafts passes that she be diming us with, it's fun to play with.

THE MODERATOR: Nika, Aaliyah, thank you for your time and good luck tomorrow.

NIKA MÜHL: Thank you.

AALIYAH EDWARDS: Thanks.

THE MODERATOR: -- affiliation before your first question. We'll start with back right.

Q. I understand the season goes on, and you don't get to watch much of other teams. But can you look on afar of what Felisha has done at Syracuse? And on the flip side after that, do you see maybe UConn and Syracuse renewing a rivalry at all down the line?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I would say that everyone -- it's not so much on my end as it is on their end. You know, whether it's a former player of mine or anybody that just takes over a program, I kind of leave it up to them. Like, whatever your time line is, you know, you pick up the phone. You call us. It's pretty easy to get a game with us.

As far as... nothing about what's happened at Syracuse is remotely surprising. I tried really, really hard to get Felisha that job before, and they finally realized the obvious thing for them to do. So the way they play, the way she coaches them and how successful they've been in such a short period of time.

These are the same exact things she did at the University of Buffalo, right? And she loves the school. She loves the community. I recruited her out of high school when I was at UVA. And I've been really, really a fan of hers from back then, you know?

So, yeah. When I saw they were in our bracket, I wasn't too pleased.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go front row on the right here. Pat.

Q. Geno, it's no secret that you guys have had trouble with high-level guards this season, whether it's been Hidalgo or Harper or any of those. And now you face another one tomorrow. What's different about this team and what's going to allow you to prevent her from going off like the other guards did?

GENO AURIEMMA: Nothing. She is going to go off. You know, she is going to score a lot of points.

That's what she does. And she's really good at it. And I don't know that you're going to be able to go, hey, make sure she gets 10 tonight. I mean, it might be, like, hey, can we keep her under 20? That would be a great accomplishment.

So sometimes, you know, one player can beat you. One player can be that dominant. I think she is that dominant. And I don't think one player on our team's going to be able to do it by herself.

And she does get some help from her teammates. But in those games, except for the NC State game, in those games, the struggle for us was as much offensively as it was defensively because even when guards get 30 something as Hidalgo did, the score was 60-60 going into the fourth quarter, and we fell apart offensively.

So I don't know that you can just go out and take somebody out of the game that's that good. On the other end, you've got to score, and you've got to continue to score the entire game. So... we know she's going to score, and we hope we're going to score.

THE MODERATOR: Third row on the left.

Q. Going back to your relationship with Felisha, you know, what about her as a player made you want to recruit her to UVA? And then over the last 40 years, how have you really seen her grow and develop?

GENO AURIEMMA: How many years?

Q. 40.

(Laughter)

Q. And then over that time period, how have you really seen her develop as a coach and a leader for Syracuse?

GENO AURIEMMA: First of all, let me just say I really miss my trips to Syracuse. That was one of the best places for us to travel to. It was a pain in the ass getting there sometimes, but it was great to go to.

We had the same restaurant all the time. And we had the good fortune to have 500 journalism majors sitting there asking me goddamn questions that I had to answer.

And then no other place in America do you go do you find that. So I kind of miss those interactions.

And as far as Felisha's concerned, I loved her as a competitor, as a player. You know, she was active. She was -- as I said, she competed. She could score.

She has an infectious personality, you know. She was a great leader on her team. And as a coach, I think she's found her way, you know. I think there were some, you know, struggles early in her career, which there are for most people.

And sometimes you're in too big of a job too soon, and you're not quite sure, you know? But I think she found the perfect spot for her at Buffalo, and it was just a matter of time until she ended up at a place where she can compete for a national championship.

You know, I saw her yesterday. And, you know, chatted a little bit. She's one of the bright young stars, you know, in our game.

Q. Just a quick follow-up. You mentioned that you kind of vouched for her to get the job at Syracuse. What did you really do behind the scenes, and how do you think that maybe helped her?

GENO AURIEMMA: I really didn't do much. I just, you know, said to John Wildhack, "What the hell's your problem?" And that was pretty much the extent of the conversation.

THE MODERATOR: Fourth row on the left.

Q. Coach, downstairs Paige talked a little bit about, you know, coming back from injury after missing the tournament last year. But there's still no excuse. She still feels a lot of the pressure with, you know, the standard that UConn has. What have you seen from Paige this time around in terms of her drive and her motivation to kind of get back to where she was her freshmen year at kind of the top of the pedestal there?

GENO AURIEMMA: In some ways Paige had a much better year this year than she did her freshmen year. Freshmen year she was new and exciting, and everybody was all hopped up about the legend of Paige Bueckers.

You know, she came in. I remember I told her she was

famous for being famous. She hadn't played any games. She hadn't done anything, and she was famous, and I couldn't understand why. You know, I was calling her Paige Kardashian for a while when she was a freshman. And everybody fell in love with the way she played, as they should.

And then she disappeared, through no fault of her own. And she's back, and she's better than she was. But it doesn't translate into anything other than, you know, she's on everybody's all-American team because they remember what a good player she is.

And in this postseason, I think she's been the best player in the postseason in the country. I don't know anybody that's had a better postseason from the Big East Tournament till now. I think she's averaging 27 a game, something like that. And everything else that she's doing.

Somebody just told me she would have to miss the next 150 shots to have as bad a shooting percentage as some people she plays against around the country that are viewed as great, great, great players. Think about that stat.

She would have to miss 150 straight shots. That's how high her shooting percentage is. So she's very efficient. She's a great leader. And we wouldn't be here talking about her if she wasn't playing.

Q. Just a quick follow-up.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah.

Q. What kind of similarities do you see between her and someone like Breanna Stewart who, you know, kind of led your kind of previous heir on this team in winning those national championships?

GENO AURIEMMA: They actually have a lot of similarities. I wish Paige was 6'4", you know, and had a 7-foot wingspan. I wish she was built like Stewy. They have a lot of similarities. They really do. Very quiet confidence, you know.

They, obviously, impact the game. They don't impact the game the same way, but they have a tremendous impact on the game. And she expects to win every single game she plays, regardless of who we're playing. So her and Stewy are very, very similar in that respect.

You know, people have asked me about her and Diana. Her and Diana have absolutely nothing in common other than, you know, the impact. But in terms of, like, the other stuff, they have nothing in common. But her and Stewy,

that's a very good comparison.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to the back left corner.

Q. Geno, I think you recruited Dyaisha for a little while earlier early in her high school career? What do you remember from that, I guess, experience?

GENO AURIEMMA: These kids have been around for so long, you kind of forget.

Q. (No microphone).

GENO AURIEMMA: You know? Yeah. To be honest with you, so much has passed. And I don't know that we got very far in that recruiting. So, you know, college recruiting is kind of fun -- funny, I should say, in that you might look at a kid and say, I don't know. I don't know why I like her, but I like her, and I want that kid on my team.

You might look at another kid and go, I don't know. I don't know that it would be a great fit for us to have her. And then when you play against her, you go, why didn't you guys make me take that kid? Why didn't we recruit that kid? That kid should be on our team.

So you make these decisions, and sometimes you get them right, and sometimes you wish you had, you know, done it differently. But we never got far enough with her to really feel like, man, I wish we would have been able to pull that one off.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to Kristi, third row on the right.

Q. Geno, assess the synergy that you've seen in the postseason with Paige and Aaliyah, especially in March.

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, obviously, they've played a lot of basketball together. They've also taken on a lot of responsibility. When you're playing with freshmen, you have to -- you have to be really good every night. I thought Paige and Aaliyah, throughout the season, you know, whenever they struggled, we struggled. Whenever Aaliyah struggled a lot, we struggled a lot.

So as we've gotten into the postseason, there, obviously, is no room for error, no margin for error. So when Aaliyah got hurt in the Big East Tournament, I think Paige took on an even bigger role. And I think she's happy that Aaliyah's back because those two do have a connection, and they do work really well together.

And if they play great tomorrow night, we have a great

chance to win. If they play really, really bad, then things are going to be really, really bad for us. That's a lot of pressure for them to work under, you know. Every team has one or two players like that that they can't win without.

THE MODERATOR: Up front to Pat. Front row here on the right. Sorry.

Q. Geno, I know you like to talk about how 18 and 19-year-olds shouldn't be getting tired at all. But Syracuse played Arizona yesterday, which is a team that also has seven players. And Arizona got in foul trouble, and Arizona got worn down in the fourth quarter.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah.

Q. What have you done this season to make sure your team stays out of those situations? Have you changed anything on offense or defense? And how do you keep them fresh?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, we really haven't done a lot differently because we are very imaginative. We've had to do things differently because we had no other choice. So we don't practice as long, which is good and bad. You know, we don't practice as long, so it keeps them fresh. We don't practice as long so they don't keep making the same dumb mistakes over and over again. So, you know, it's a toss-up.

We don't play a lot of defenses because that would take a lot of time to teach. And we don't have a lot of time. We don't play a lot of zone because we're too small. So there's a lot of things that we have to do because that's all we can do.

Our offense is basically, you know, the same as it's been for the last 30 years. A couple tweaks, you know, to help some of the players with their particular strengths but not that much different, you know. It's just the amount of time that we can spend in the gym, you know.

And Andrea Hudy, our Strength and Conditioning Coach, and Janelle Francisco, our Athletic Trainer, you know, those guys have their hands full. And they've done a fantastic job with our kids.

But, no. We just don't practice much. That's the only thing we can do.

THE MODERATOR: We are out of time, Coach. Thank you.

GENO AURIEMMA: Oh. You've got a question, though.

THE MODERATOR: All right.

GENO AURIEMMA: Go ahead.

THE MODERATOR: There you go.

Q. Thank you, Coach. But going back to Paige a little bit, you know, with you mentioning that --

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, if I knew it was going to be about Paige, I wouldn't have.

(Laughter)

I thought you were going to ask about me. Go ahead.

Q. With you mentioning that, you know, you feel like she's playing at her best right now, can you take me back to when you first recruited her, and what did you envision as her ceiling could be, you know, with the program here?

GENO AURIEMMA: The first time I saw Paige play, she played, like, a minute and a half at a time because she was hyperventilating or something. She weighed about 90 pounds, and she would go 100 miles an hour. She was like the proverbial balloon, you know. When you let it out, it just (whirring noise) and then just falls to the ground. That's how she played. And then she'd run over to the bench (panting). And then come back out, do something crazy, and go back to the bench.

And I remember saying to Marisa Mosley who was with me, seriously? Says this the best player in the country? You've got to be kidding me. The kid can't stay on the court. She just, you know, was such a young kid and so not filled in. I mean, she's big now by her standards if you look at her now. Like, this is huge.

This is the biggest she's ever been. So she was just, like, this very frail kid. But she had something about her that only the great ones have. And you could see it. And you could feel it. She just sees the game the way only great players can see the game.

You can't teach someone -- you know, Coach Bob Knight said this a long time ago. You can always teach a player to look, but you can't teach them to see. They might be looking, but they have no idea what they're looking for.

And she knows before she even looks what she needs to see. And she sees it quicker than anybody else. And then she has the God-given talent to pull it off. And she spends hours and hours and hours in the gym.

To your point, like, if we practice 45 minutes or an hour, I know because when we leave, she's going to sneak in there and put another half hour or 45 minutes on, which doesn't make anybody happy, but she can't stay out of the gym.

So people think, you know, you're born with that. You're born with some of it. The rest she's worked her ass off for. And she deserves everything that she's getting.

And I said this yesterday to somebody. I said, she's the least -- she's the worst officiated superstar in college basketball. And you saw it yesterday. There are things that happened to her that if she was allowed to play defense the way people play defense against her, yeah. She's good. Thank God.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you.

GENO AURIEMMA: You're welcome.