

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

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Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

UConn Huskies

Geno Auriemma

Kaitlyn Chen

Paige Bueckers

Media Conference



Q. Paige, Sarah comes off to us kind of reserved, quiet, not a lot of words. Whatever she is with you guys, how does her personality mesh well with you guys?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I would say her personality off the court is probably completely opposite of what she is on the court. Her sense of humor, her quick wittedness, just everything -- she fits right in with the team, obviously. She's more quiet and more poker-faced on the court, but you know who she is off the court. I mean, she meshes extremely well with the team.

Q. Kaitlyn, you were always an underdog in the tournament when you were at Princeton. Do you feel like your mindset is different at all coming in as kind of a favorite, expected to win this year?

KAITLYN CHEN: I feel like that mindset at Princeton, keeping with me, just sort of knowing that no underdog team is really scared of anyone, and they sort of have that mentality to where, like, it's anyone's game, and they're coming in, like, confident that they can win, too. So sort of just keeping that mindset and not taking anything for granted, taking no opponent easily.

Q. For either of you, obviously an unknown opponent with Arkansas State, but from what you've learned this week, what have you learned about the Red Wolves?

PAIGE BUECKERS: They have a unique playing style. They play a lot of people. They sub quickly, sub fastly. They shoot a lot of threes. I think they lead the country in threes attempted, threes made in game. Getting out, contesting, trying to limit their threes, make them all contested. And then defensively, they're extremely scrappy. They overplay. They try to get out and deny passes, create a lot of chaos and turnovers.

Q. Kaitlyn, you have the cool experience of playing in this arena both at UConn and as an opponent. What's it like playing in front of a crowd here?

KAITLYN CHEN: It's been amazing to play in front of this

Q. Paige, these are your last couple games at Gampel Pavilion. What has it meant playing in this arena and what makes it so special playing here?

PAIGE BUECKERS: It's been an amazing time here at Gampel. I think it's the best environment in the world. Obviously, the support makes Gampel what it is. Everybody who comes in 60 minutes before the games start, and they're just there supporting us. And obviously, their intensity during the games, their support during the games, it means everything to us as players. It's been really fun to play here.

Q. Paige, there's a lot of pressure coming into this tournament for you. How are you managing the preparation? Do you feel differently coming into this year than you have in the past?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Just as we did every tournament, just take it one game at a time. Nothing is guaranteed. The preparation, the practice to prepare for the 40 minutes ahead of you is what's most important, so just focusing on that and focusing on the journey ahead, and just loving every moment of it, obviously knowing you're not going to get a chance. There's a different sense of urgency, but sort of attacking it with the same mentality.

Q. Kaitlyn, how does it feel to be entering the NCAA Tournament, but with the Huskies instead of Princeton?

KAITLYN CHEN: It's a new experience. I'm definitely looking forward to it. I feel like we're very prepared, and I'm just excited to play again. It's been a while.



crowd here. As Paige said, it's a really special experience. There's just so much energy, and they're really there for you. That was actually one of the things I remembered about playing here, was the fans getting there before we even got there.

It's definitely nicer playing for the Huskies here than against.

Q. Paige, for you as kind of the leader of this team, how much do those demands on you change coming into the tournament? Do you have to do anything to get the young guys ready for this moment?

PAIGE BUECKERS: I wouldn't necessarily say do anything different, just be there for support, be there for accountability, be there for, obviously, my experience and the fact that I've been here a couple years doing this. So just instilling that confidence within them, just continuing to play their game regardless of the circumstances or the stakes. You kind of want to focus on that.

Q. Paige, how different does it feel going into the tournament this year compared to last year, especially given how much depth you guys have?

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I think there's a different feel to it knowing that there's a lot more people available able to help contribute in any way possible. So there's definitely an excitement around it, just knowing, like, on any given night, it can be anybody's night and not the same five people or six people that we always had to play last year.

Not saying that it wasn't a great journey and opportunity that we had last year, but definitely different, more exciting just to be able to have more people available and share the court with more people, and you're just excited for everybody who gets to play.

Q. Coach, you've been a part of so many different NCAA tournaments, but what's different about this one?

GENO AURIEMMA: Nothing. While you guys were asking the players questions, I was thinking back to the very first NCAA Tournament game we played in this building, and it was the second time ever that we had been in the tournament.

We were just hoping and praying that we could win a game and get to the next round.

And I want to say, obviously, so much has changed, but at the same time, one thing is always the same, whether you're playing in this building, somebody else's building,

whether you're playing a team that everybody thinks is a great team, a team that everybody thinks you're going to struggle with or beat by a lot. None of that matters because between all those years, from that one to this one, we've been in every single scenario that you can imagine.

The only thing different about it is this is 2025 and that was 1989-90.

But otherwise, you play every game like it's your last game of the season because it very well could be. That hasn't changed, and that will never change. Anybody who looks ahead is setting themselves up for failure.

Q. Following up that question, when you're a 45-point favorite, how do you avoid the outside noise, saying that the first round should just be a cake walk?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I liked it better when you had no idea that you were a 45-point favorite. So now the fact that they put that out there pisses me off because, obviously, it does affect some people's thinking, and if you're not careful, your players actually start to think that the score is actually 45-0 at the beginning of the game.

You have to go out and win that game, and whatever perception there is, you hope that the players are mature enough, because certainly as a coach you are mature enough -- yes, there's a big talent discrepancy between a No. 2 seed and a No. 15 seed, obviously, whether that's us or anybody else. So there's a talent discrepancy.

But if you follow the NCAA Tournament, talent isn't always the indicator of why you win. Being at home isn't always the indicator of why you win. Playing great the night that you're supposed to play is an indicator of why you win.

The basketball doesn't know when it's in your hands that you're a 45-point favorite, and it's either going to go in or it's not, and that's all there is to it. I'm always amazed by that stuff.

Q. Paige has talked a lot about how there's a different sense of urgency for her, given that this is her last tournament. Have you noticed anything different about her over the past few days when you're prepping for this game tomorrow that kind of shows that, or has she just been the same?

GENO AURIEMMA: No, I really haven't noticed anything different, to be honest with you, and I'm glad.

As a matter of fact, at our last practice, our very last practice, she did something so stupid, and she hasn't done it since she was a freshman -- or I should say, it's the same

thing she did when she was a freshman. So I'm thinking, so yeah, I'm glad I've helped her really grow these last seven years, or however long she's been here, dammit.

So no, I haven't seen anything different. She's the way she's always been. If you see her runs through the tournament, they've all been great. One thing you can say about Paige is, generally speaking, she saves her best basketball for the biggest moments. Nobody does it 100 percent of the time, but she pretty much -- you can count on that.

That might be because she kind of prepares that way all the time and doesn't have to do anything different just because it's that time of the year.

Now, having said that, I do think when seniors get to the NCAA Tournament and, obviously, it's their last time, it can go a couple different ways. The fear of what's next. I remember when kids lose in the NCAA Tournament when they're freshmen, the look on their face in the locker room is like, hmm, that was interesting, I can't wait until the next three years to see how that feels, because they think it's, like, preordained.

But when you get to be a senior and maybe that dawns on you, you can either blow up and be the biggest thing that's ever played in this building, which I hope happens, and I've seen some guys, the fear of the unknown gets them.

But I haven't seen anything in Paige that's different.

Q. Geno, between you and Aaron Johnston, you guys are the two longest tenured women's coaches at the same school. Could you do that today, and what are the challenges of staying at one school at this time, particularly the way things are changing in the sport?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, yeah, there certainly aren't a lot of us left, right? I guess we missed the note on the portal. We have to find out if there's a portal for coaches.

I'm sure when he started and when I started, once you find a place that's comfortable and they like you, you like them and you have some success, there is no -- you reach a point where there is nowhere to go. There is nowhere to go because you don't want to.

Will that be happening in the future? No. No, it won't happen in the future. I think the coaching profession is going to be a lot like the playing landscape. Coaches are going to be at places, and after a couple years, they find -- not everyone is going to be like this, but either the administration doesn't like the fact that they're paying kids money and you're losing and you're out, or you find that

you're not getting what you need to be successful in this environment, so there will be a lot more movement in the future.

So yeah, the two of us are relics. But there's something to be said for that, too, you know.

Q. One last Arkansas State question. Obviously, an uncommon opponent, so you're just learning about them this week. Now that we're getting to the end of the week, what have you learned about the Red Wolves going into tomorrow?

GENO AURIEMMA: You know, one of the downsides, I guess you would say, still, maybe in the women's game -- not as much as it used to be, but when you're a certain level in Division I, you tend to be like in a silo, and you're so tunnel vision, you're so into what you're doing and who are we playing and what's next for us that you don't really notice what's going on around the country until NCAA Tournament time.

So it's funny, when I first saw that we were playing Arkansas State and I started watching it on film, I actually asked one of my assistants, I said, Kim Caldwell, does she coach in that league? And they went, yes. I said, now it makes sense. Because they remind me of a mini-Tennessee in their style of play and how they want to impose themselves on your -- normally, if that was happening in the SEC or if that was happening in the Big Ten or if that was happening in the ACC, whatever, you would know that. But these things, that's what's great about the NCAA Tournament, you find out these things once you see the bracket.

For me, it's kind of exciting to look and go, yeah, there's a lot of coaches doing a lot of great things that you just don't know about until now. I can see why they're here. Because their style of play is different. It's unique. If you're not prepared for it, if you don't see it all the time, it could be a major problem, regardless. So having played Tennessee, this won't be the first time that we're seeing something similar to this.

Q. Are you expecting to have Aubrey Griffin back at full strength for the tournament? I know she didn't play in the Big East Tournament, and Sarah pretty much held the fort down. What kind of impact do you expect Aubrey to have?

GENO AURIEMMA: I'm not sure yet. I'm not sure yet. She's done a couple things during practice, but I'm not sure -- will we have her back? Probably. Probably, possibly. Full strength? Not sure yet.

Q. When you get to study the brackets, you look at things. I don't know if you've noticed anything kind of unusual or different, whatever. But one thing I noticed was this is the only sub-regional with three ranked teams, not that the rankings have anything to do with where you're seeded, but just a thought on that or anything you noticed about the bracket that kind of stood out to you once you got to look at it?

GENO AURIEMMA: No. I mean, I think as you -- me and you might be the only two people in this room that know where Bratislava is. Every bracket, if you ask the right people, they hate it. They don't like their bracket. They don't like their seeding. They don't like their opponent. They don't like their venue, where they're going to play.

Do I notice anything different in our bracket than others? It's hard. It's hard. So is every other one. Challenging. Ranked teams, unranked teams.

I don't worry about rankings, or I don't worry about stuff like that. I worry about matchups. What do they look like? What about them gives us cause for concern?

No. No.

Contrary to public opinion, I don't necessarily like playing at home in the NCAA Tournament. I really don't. Never liked playing at home in the NCAA Tournament. I don't like it. I don't like playing at home in the Big East Tournament because the perception out there is, well, you're at home so let's let the officials screw you here and there. Not that anybody thinks like that, not that they actually do that. That's just me being paranoid.

But I think there's a lot of things that go into playing at home that you wouldn't have to deal with, both outside stuff, players, what they have to go through when they're home and blah, blah, blah. I don't ever feel comfortable here no matter who the opponent is. I'd be happy to just win tomorrow and not worry about anything else and hope to get a win Monday night if we play and move on.

Q. Is there anything in Sarah's game that makes you think she could be rattled on a big stage like this for the first time?

GENO AURIEMMA: Nope. Nope. No. She's looked out of sorts one time this year, at Tennessee. She had five turnovers. I thought she was horrendous. Just the fact that she got 18 points and 9 rebounds has nothing to do with it. So if that's her s--- game, then I'm pretty good going into tomorrow.

Q. Along the same line with Sarah, I was wondering

what your first impression of her was when you first met her because she's so quiet on the court, which kind of goes against -- around everybody else is she more outspoken? You've seen her on the podium. I was wondering what your first impression of her was, of her personality.

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I think she's wiser beyond her years because she only has fun with her friends. She has no time for me, for you, for anybody else. Whatever you get from her is what we all get as coaches. Her friends, her teammates, that's a whole different story. She's very, very bright. I don't care about you. She don't care about me. She don't care about whoever has a microphone, whoever has a camera, she could care less. Her friends, she has a blast, always.

One of the first times I really, really went to go watch her play seriously, there were three people in the gym: Me and two of her other coaches, and that's it. The gym held less chairs than what's here. It was just them working out, her and her team, and it was just the three of us.

We watched, hi, how you doing? Then we went home. I thought, I really like her.

Q. Another question about Sarah. You mentioned that Tennessee game, saying that she played horrendously --

GENO AURIEMMA: Horrendous. Only 18 and 9.

Q. So if that's a bad game, what game stands out to you as her playing her best, and what does that look like?

GENO AURIEMMA: I think it varies. Some of this, some of that. I actually thought the third quarter in the Big East championship game was just unbelievable. It's only this big a portion, but you got to see this is what it's going to be like going forward.

The Louisville game, a little bit of that. The Iowa State game, a little bit of that. She averaged a double-double the entire Big East Tournament, I think.

I think the moments that mean the most have been her biggest. I think she's mature beyond what I expected on the court, and it's come out in the biggest moments.

Q. With the parity in women's basketball, for years it's always been UConn versus the field or South Carolina versus the field. How does that make this -- the fact that there's so many championship contenders, does it make it more exciting?

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GENO AURIEMMA: More exciting for them, not for me. I liked it better the other way.

But yeah, in reality, obviously, there will never be 20 teams that have a chance to win a National Championship. That's probably unrealistic. But from the years when there was three or four to now when there may be, I don't know, eight or nine -- I don't know how many there are today, but certainly more than a few years ago.

I think all that's great, but even more than that, more than that, even if there aren't way more teams that have an opportunity to win a National Championship, I think where parity begins is, that there's much greater chances of upset in the first two or three rounds than there ever was before. That is where the fun is in the NCAA Tournament.

You look at March Madness, it's about a 15 beating a 2, a 14 beating a 3, a 10 winning when they're not supposed to. So it doesn't follow the chalk all the way through from beginning to end.

The same four, five, six teams maybe are the frontrunners, and you may end up with a Final Four that's very similar to the one that was there last year or the year before. But everything leading up to it has changed, and that, I think, is what creates the real excitement at this time of the year.

Q. I know one of the things you always liked about the NCAA Tournament was playing new opponents. Usually -- there's probably not that many out there anymore --

GENO AURIEMMA: They found two of them, though.

Q. Actually three of them, if you win tomorrow, you play two. It's been a while since you lost to a first-time opponent --

GENO AURIEMMA: Why do you always bring this up?

Q. I'm about numbers because I don't know words. (Laughter). Do you remember the last time?

GENO AURIEMMA: The last time what?

Q. You lost to a first-time opponent.

GENO AURIEMMA: A first-time opponent? I don't know, Louisville.

Q. Georgia.

GENO AURIEMMA: Where?

Q. Regular season game, Martin Luther King --

GENO AURIEMMA: Oh, yeah, I was going to say -- yeah, it was cold as hell that day, too, driving up here. I think Saudia Roundtree scored a 90. Did she get 90 on us? I think she did. Felt like 90.

Q. Do you still feel like it's hard to play against you guys because of your style as much as your talent?

GENO AURIEMMA: Maybe that's the other thing that's changed. When we had all those long winning streaks, I think there was this perception that when we play teams that, well, nobody else can beat UConn, what make you think we can. And that was pretty powerful. You think about it, we're winning 80, 90 in a row, and we're walking in here and playing you on a neutral site -- even at your place. The overwhelming feeling is, well, nobody else can beat them, so we have no chance. That wasn't necessarily true, but they helped us win.

I don't think that exists anymore. People see us lose now. So because they see us lose, they go, well, hell, it ain't like they're invincible. And it's true.

The fact that perception has changed is good because you don't ever want teams that you're playing to feel like I don't have a chance to win so why even bother. You want everybody you play to feel like we're here to beat UConn's ass, which is really good.

Now, having said that, I hope this weekend these guys are scared to death, but I don't think they will be. I don't think they will be.

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