

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

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

UConn Huskies

Coach Geno Auriemma

Azzi Fudd

Sarah Strong

Media Conference

UConn 103, Arkansas State 43

THE MODERATOR: Joining us from UConn head Coach Geno Auriemma and student-athletes Sarah Strong and Azzi Fudd. We will start with a statement from Coach.

GENO AURIEMMA: We were talking in the locker room about it's the same formula every time we play. If we're locked in offensively, if we have a game plan and we stick to it, and do the things that we think we're pretty good at, we just see how many shots we make and see where that takes us.

Obviously we played well today defensively, and obviously we made a ton of shots today. Sometimes these games don't go that way, but today's did. We'll see if we have one more in us on Monday.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Azzi, you tied your career high of six steals and two blocks. I know defense has been a really big emphasis for you. Where do you think is your biggest growth on that side of the ball recently?

AZZI FUDD: I think just taking chances. Before I was very -- I didn't want to risk missing the steal and then my man getting by me and having to make all my teammates scramble, so I played very reserved. So this year I just feel like from the beginning Coach kind of challenged me to take more risks. I try to get in the passing lane more, and that's what I've been trying to do, and I've gotten more comfortable with it. So just being aggressive today, trying to get in the passing lane. He said it before, You'll be



surprised how many times they just throw it right in your hand.

Q. Azzi, add another career high for you, seven assists today. How are you finding the balance between the scoring and the passing, and what was going so well for you offensively?

AZZI FUDD: I just think the ball was moving really well today. I really don't know how I got seven assists, but I think the ball was moving well. People were open and shooting when they were open. So it was a lot of fun just to see everyone have confidence, shooting the ball when they're open, not hesitating. We made a lot of shots, so it was great.

Q. Sarah, you got your first NCAA game under your belt. How did it feel? You shot 9 of 10, had five assists, and had a double-double. How did it feel?

SARAH STRONG: It was a lot of fun being out there with my team. Everything was pretty much going our way, so that really helped. Excited for the next one.

Q. When you have a game like this, do you feel like there's anything that you can improve on, or would you call this a perfect game basically that you guys played today with the way you dominated on the court?

AZZI FUDD: I definitely wouldn't say it was perfect. There are still things we need to work on, things we need to clean up.

I think that it's March. It's not a time to get complacent. It's that time of year to pick everything apart because this is the time where the little things are what cause -- it's the little things that cause you to lose in big games. So making sure that we just have every single thing tightened up, like no turnovers, no silly fouls, all that kind of stuff. Cleaning all that up will be important.

Q. Can you talk a little bit more about the team's defensive effort today? You had five blocks. The team had 13 blocks as a whole.



SARAH STRONG: I feel like we're doing a really good job communicating and being there for each other and just talking through everything.

Q. The next matchup is going to be Oklahoma State versus South Dakota State. How close are you going to watch that game to see who you'll be playing on Monday? Can you speak about just how excited that you are going to be back in the championship game on Monday?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, we're going to watch that game, but I think we've been really stressing how important it is for us to take care of ourselves first and make sure that all of our stuff, our offense, our defense is down pat because when we play our best UConn basketball, it doesn't matter who we're playing, we're going to win.

Q. Azzi, I know people have asked you about playing in your first tournament in a few years, but since you were just having such a good game out there, what did it feel like to be on the floor and to be hitting all those shots? Were you having fun?

AZZI FUDD: I had a lot of fun, and it felt great to be out there, especially it's tournament time, it's been a while. I'm so grateful. It was so much fun. Especially being at home, getting the great crowd, the great fans. The atmosphere never fails here, so it was amazing.

Q. March is big for March Madness, but it's also Women's History Month. For both of you, if you can, talk about someone within your life that inspired both of you.

SARAH STRONG: For me it was my mom.

AZZI FUDD: I would also say my mom, but I think we're surrounded by so many empowering and inspiring females in our lives. I think just being in our building, we have Anna right here. She's incredible. So thanks, Anna.

Q. Azzi, you had some really good looks tonight from the 3-point line. You shot 6 for 9. Are you seeing those kind of looks throughout the season, or did you guys do something different to get those looks in? By the way, you didn't hesitate. You just shot.

AZZI FUDD: I've definitely gotten those looks this season, and some of them are just press break, my teammates find me, and a lot of them are also my teammates sending me great screens and getting me open.

I think it's definitely stuff we've worked in during the

season, in practice, and I think it just shows our chemistry is getting so close. They know where to find me. It's easy that way.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, ladies. Questions for Coach.

Q. Your guard play, specifically Kaitlyn and Paige, what did you see? It looked for me like it was a lot of unselfish basketball coming out of the back court.

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, a lot of times things are -- not a lot of times. Most of the time things are dictated by the style of play that the other team kind of makes you play. You know, the pressure that they like to put, that's who they are. That's how they like to play. So they're not going to change just because it's the NCAA Tournament.

So you go into the game knowing that this is how it's going to be. If you complete a couple of passes early in the possession, you're going to get a lot of opportunities on the back end, and that's pretty much what happened. It's like every time we broke their pressure, there was wide-open opportunity down the other end.

I thought our guards shot the ball exceptionally well. When you play a team that's willing to give you a lot of those because they think they're going to take more of them and make more of them, it's easy if you go out there and miss them all. It plays right into the way they want to play.

But if you make a bunch, like we did today, and you're not going to be able to do that if people aren't unselfish, and that's the way you have to play if you play at Connecticut. It's not about you all the time. Some nights is; some nights it's not. What do we have? 29 assists on 40 baskets. That's pretty good.

Q. Kind of what Azzi said. You know, she has worked hard on her game on all aspects. I know this is her first time back in the tournament in two years, but do you feel like this is the strongest and most well-rounded she's looked since her return this year?

GENO AURIEMMA: It's been a while for sure that we've been able to have somewhat of a full complement of players especially when you are missing really key pieces.

A lot of times when kids haven't played and then you throw them out there, they put a lot of pressure on themselves to make up for two years of missing NCAA tournaments and try to get it all back in one night. For me it's putting Azzi in a position where she likes being in and letting her do what she does best.

Again, play a team that plays like they played today, those opportunities come more frequently. So maybe it was the best way to start her comeback in the NCAA Tournament. I think it will be drastically different Monday night. Those opportunities won't come as easy. That doesn't mean they won't be there, but they won't come as easy.

So it's great that she's been able to experience that kind of confidence this early in the tournament. Hopefully it carries over to the next game.

Q. Kind of off that note, Geno, where have you seen kind of Azzi develop more on that kind of the mental side of things throughout the season, just given everything that she went through and even having to sit out a few games with a knee tweak and having to come back? Have you seen that confidence build and blossom, especially after the game today?

GENO AURIEMMA: That's always the biggest question with not just Azzi, but a lot of players is they are so married to their last couple of possessions, and they can't shake them sometimes. So somebody makes two straight threes, basket looks as big as a swimming pool, right? They miss their first two, and they start to question whatever they're doing.

I think as you get older and you have to grow up a little bit and you have to mature, I think that's been part of the process for Azzi. I think she did the same thing earlier this season. I think she started 2 for 10 and then came out and made all of them. That's a sign of growth. You know, it's a sign of taking each possession as it comes and not letting it be tied into the previous one.

I also think that the more you do other than shoot the ball, the better success you have shooting it because when all you do is just shoot and you don't do anything else, that's always on your mind, and you are obsessed with it, and if it doesn't go your way, you make things worse. You get a couple of blocks, you get seven steals, I mean, I think she tied her career high in rebounds. How many did she have? One. Yeah, that's a career high for her, I think. So we're not quite ready to put the most all-around player in the history of UConn next to her name just quite yet, but we're working on it. We're working on it.

Q. Coach that, whole first half just kind of seemed like everything was working for you guys. Could you tell coming into this game that they had that kind of energy coming out? What clicked so well, did you feel like?

GENO AURIEMMA: We probably talked about this. This is the only time in a year where you have two weeks off,

right? Last time we played was two weeks ago. Well, Monday night's game will be two weeks since we played that game. You never have that much time off, and you have no idea how much it's going to -- believe me, there were some God-awful practices during those two weeks. I mean, awful.

I think that's their way of saying, Coach, we just want to play. So when game time does roll around, there's been a lot of pent-up frustration and waiting. You know it's going to come out. I could see it yesterday at practice, shoot-around today. There's a different look, a different vibe when game time is right here right now.

Now, you don't know whether that's going to translate into how many shots you make. Today, fortunately, it did. It did.

Q. To piggyback off what you just said, when you have a game like this, it seemed like it was the perfect game as far as, like, defense set the tone, you scored off the defense, the turnovers. Would you call this like a perfect game, a 10? Is there anything that you can see in this game that you would go back and say maybe, I'm concerned about this come Monday night?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, as Azzi said, there's always something when you go and you pick the film apart. You don't necessarily take it as everything we did today was a perfect 10 because there's enough things in there that were not, but they're masked because of the talent differential.

So we played today, and we didn't beat the Lakers today. No disrespect to Arkansas State. The talent gap is huge. So you should expect to play really, really well. Now, no one deserves to shoot 70% or whatever we shot in the first half, but you do have to play at a whole higher level than the team you're playing against because the talent is so great.

Even though the talent gap is great, you still have to make sure that you play. So in terms of what was our effort like, what was our execution like, do we make good decision more times than we make bad decisions, all those things you're going to look at and go, you know, given the kind of game that it was and who our opponent was, yeah, everything that should have been done pretty close was done that way.

On our coach's mind, we're looking at things going, Okay, let's say Monday night, well, that same action they just did, will that carry over to Monday, because if we do it just like that on Monday, yes. That won't. Will that carry over? No. If we do that Monday night, that ain't going to work. It only

worked tonight because of circumstances.

That's how we have to think as coaches, and that's what makes me always, I don't want to say, unhappy, but various degrees of misery because you're always trying to interpret where will this -- if we win Monday night, will this? This next weekend, if we're fortunate enough to play next weekend, how much of this stuff that if we do it exactly the way we did it is going to help us win that game? 50%? 60%? Who knows?

If you do ten things and you know they only work because the opponent couldn't match it, but now what happens when the opponent can? So that's how you judge how did we play. You know, it's delicate, and the players don't understand it. They just go, hey, look, Coach, we won by a lot. It was great, wasn't it? Yeah. I mean, I'm happy for them, but you know, you've got to be realistic too.

Q. I have to ask about the four- and five-person substitutions. What do the coaching adjustments look like when facing such unorthodox subbing patterns from your opponent?

GENO AURIEMMA: We were lucky we played Tennessee this year, and they employed kind of the same thing. One of the things we talked about was don't foul, because if they don't get to the free-throw line, the clock doesn't stop, they can't stop. Don't turn the ball over a lot. Again, less opportunities to sub.

It's tough on you are matchups. You know, who's got who? We switch a lot on defense. They're constantly guarding somebody different anyway. But, yeah, it's very unusual, and it's a little bit disconcerting a little bit. You know, all right, who's got who? Maybe the second group plays completely different than the first group. Who knows? So you are always wondering about that.

One with thing I have to say before we leave, though, I'm not sure if this was Arkansas State -- you might know. Is this their first NCAA Tournament bid? First-ever, right? Okay.

So I think it was unfortunate that they stayed 45 minutes away from here, and that's not a UConn thing. That's just the way it played out. I wanted to say that in the future I would hope that we would be able to find -- there's a lot of good places around here. So in the future I would hope that when someone goes to the NCAA Tournament, whether it's their first time or 101st time, that they have the kind of experience, you know, because it makes it look like there's only two hotels in all of Eastern Connecticut, and that's not the case says.

Whatever that criteria is or whatever we need, I think those kids deserve a little better than that. Hopefully they still enjoyed it. That's a problem for the eight teams that are going to regionals too because when you have eight teams in one place, it's not easy to find equitable accommodations for all eight teams, unless you are going to Chicago, New York, a big city like that.

That's always on my mind as a coach. How do you make the experience great? If you are UConn, nobody gives a damn. These guys will go to a Final Four, and they'll sleep on the floor. They don't give a damn. They've had all the experiences they've ever dreamed of.

You know, a team gets to the NCAA Tournament for a first time, it shouldn't be like a regular season game someplace. It should be pretty special. Hopefully they enjoyed the trip and it was a great experience for them.

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