

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: Second Round - South Dakota State vs UConn

Monday, March 24, 2025

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

**UConn Huskies**

**Coach Geno Auriemma**

**Paige Bueckers**

**Azzi Fudd**

Media Conference

UConn 91, South Dakota State 57

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach.

GENO AURIEMMA: I hope that it was pretty evident, certainly by the way the crowd reacted at the beginning of the game the atmosphere was pretty amazing. It's kind of what I want in an NCAA Tournament game and I think our fans proved once again why they are who they are and why we're viewed as how we're viewed and the energy in the building was just incredible. We knew that the game was going to be played the way it started because that game was going to be played that way as long as South Dakota State would you describe going to play that game for as long as they could that way. I think we changed it defensively and that kind of turned the tide and we just, you know, thought were outstanding and Paige as Paige and it's a great way to finish your career at home. There's no better way than with a game like that, a performance like that.

MODERATOR: We'll go to questions for the student-athletes first.

**Q. Paige, as I recall and I know you recall, your first games here, there were no fans. You haven't had as many chances to play here maybe as you could have had. What does it mean to you this year, these last few games here and particularly this game to kind of go out on this note in this building?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, it means everything. As you said, obviously, we started playing here with cardboard



cutouts as the fans, so just to have gone through that and then experienced the other side of it, which was amazing. The atmosphere was amazing. You can't even hear time-outs, can't even hear fouls, can't even hear the when you say whistle blow just because of how loud they are and how much support they show and it truly feels like they're a part of the team in the way they can shift the game and shift the momentum. It's been a dream to play here, a dream to wear this uniform, a dream to play in this environment. As much more times you want this to continue to happen, you just take every single chance you have and never take it for granted.

**Q. Azzi, in the second quarter, they were still up and then Paige kind of took over. What's it like when she's in the zone like that, to see it go on?**

AZZI FUDD: It's incredible to watch, but you almost fellow sorry for the other team because you know when Paige is locked in, there's nothing you can do to stop her. It doesn't matter what shot she takes, the ball's going to go in. I was on the bench getting to watch most of it so that was really fun to just get to watch and see what she does and she makes it look so easy. We have all the trust in the world in her so just got to sit back and enjoy the Paige show.

**Q. For both players, can you talk about how the game changed when KK came in the game and took Paige Meyer out of the equation?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, she has the ability every single night to change the entire game when she steps on the floor, and she knows that. She knows that's her emphasis every single game, to just come in, be disruptive, be aggressive both ends of the floor, push the pace, try to get the other team to play out of their pace. Every single time and every single night KK shows up and does that for our team and she plays an extremely huge role and she knows regardless of starting, not starting, she's a huge, key piece to this team.

**Q. Hi, ladies. Your team's defensive effort this evening was dominant from start to finish. Can you speak of how you feel your team's defense stacks up against the other 15 teams that are in the Sweet 16 and**



**how your defense is going to be so pivotal in your bid for a championship?**

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, defense is something that we've been really emphasizing all season and that we pride ourselves in and like Paige said, when you have players like KK that can come in and just completely change the dynamic of the game, specifically defensively, that's pretty amazing. And I think all of us -- you've got KK just all around being disruptive. You've got Sarah blocks and Paige sneaky, too, getting steals and stuff. I feel like just as a whole our defense has really come together this last little bit and if we continue to play defense the way that we're capable of, it's going to make it hard for any team to run their normal offense.

**Q. If you could both, Paige and Azzi speak to this... you finally had the opportunity, a long stretch, to play together and now that you've had that opportunity for a period of games, is it as much fun as you envisioned it was going to be?**

AZZI FUDD: Um... yeah. Yeah. It's pretty fun. It definitely is a lot of fun. Just getting the play with someone who knows basketball so well so you get to watch her, like I did today, you watch her take over the game and you also watch her make plays and create different opportunities for all her teammates. So it's a lot of fun to not just watch but also get to be on the floor and have her give you great looks, set good screens, everything she does and get to be part of that. It's been incredible this year.

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I will also say today was really fun because it was the first time Azzi kind of yelled at me in a game, so that was fun.

**Q. Paige, your last game here. Can you tell me your emotional walking through here maybe an hour or two before the game, what was that like for you knowing that this was going to be the last time you're playing in this arena?**

PAIGE BUECKERS: Yeah, I haven't had a wave or rush of emotions hit me yet because we're so locked in and focused on the task at hand and being present in the moment and never look at it -- we didn't look at it as our last game as Gampel. We looked at it as the second round NCAA Tournament game that we're trying to win and trying to keep advancing. I'm sure we'll have more time to reflect on it as the season, when the season is over but right now we're super focused on the present but obviously just extremely grateful and you can't really put into words how much this place has meant to me. I'm forever indebted and it's become my second home.

THE MODERATOR: Paige, Azzi, thanks for your time and good luck.

Questions for Coach?

**Q. I know you've been urging Paige to not pass upshots, take shots, maybe play more like I assume like she played tonight. Is this what you were looking for? And when you put her back in the game in the fourth quarter, was there some significance to that last basket to get to 34 for her?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Oh, no. No. No. I wanted her to feel one last time what it feels like to come off the court with that sense of appreciation from the fans, you know? So, yeah, that was it. I tried to get her out earlier, but TV time-outs and all this other stuff. No, points has nothing to do with it. There was a game earlier this year where she needed one more for a triple-double and she had already come out of the game and I wasn't putting her back in.

But, yeah, playing like this, she thinks too much about her able to be the most efficient player in the game. So I was made aware of a stat today that when she made her first free throw. It could be wrong, you'd have to take this up with Rebecca. When she made her free throw today, that put her at 50% from the floor, 40% from the three and 90% from the free-throw line, which is pretty amazing when you think of it. She has a two-to-one assist to turnover ratio, I believe. She's the only player in the NBA, WNBA, WBCA, NCAA any over player ever that's done that for an entire season. I would say that's been pretty good work by Paige. Today I think she was just thinking about winning and she was even more efficient than she normally is, so, yes, waiting five years for this moment and hopefully there's a bunch more coming up.

**Q. Is it hard to put a wrap on Paige playing here just because she wants to play four more games? This is certainly not the end of what she came here to do.**

GENO AURIEMMA: Ever since Stewie walked in and said I want to win four national championships, I thought there's a lot to this. When you're in high school, it seems so easy, you know? I go to UConn and win a national championship. The reality hits and you realize it's incredibly difficult to do that, so I don't want anyone to feel less than full when they leave here if they don't have a national championship. She's put herself in that position that if she leaves here without winning one, she's going to feel less than full. I don't feel that way and as I said, she's doing things that no one's ever done before. She's had to do a lot for us the entire time she's been here and she's getting rewarded. Everything that you all have said about her, that everybody's written about her, it's all true. Every

part of it. I wouldn't be able to sit here and add anything to that. Her game and what she does speaks for itself and it's a testament to her, to her work, to her love of basketball, love of being in the gym. She's being rewarded and that in itself is just fulfilling. It is for me and I hope it is for her.

**Q. I looked at the stats at one time and KK had no shot attempts, one assist, two steals. I thought she was the second best player on the court. It seemed like the game at that point, the court just shifted when she was out there. She was guarding three players at once at times.**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it's a reminder to everybody watching that, more so today than ever, that your value to a team, and a lot of times your value to yourself is how many points I score and that's not indicative of whether you played great or not. Certainly as you said, KK was probably, ordinary reason Paige, the most impactful player on the floor and it has nothing to do with scoring. In order to win at this level, it takes a lot of pieces that have to come together and without KK's piece... it means as much as Paige's piece.

**Q. Geno, just what were your impressions of South Dakota State tonight?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, the entire day today I kept thinking about how we would be able to get some separation from them because of all the teams we've played this year, their sense of who they are, what they're trying to do, every possession down the floor, how determined they are is second to none. I knew that was going to be the case. I knew how hard they were going to play, how disciplined they were going to play, how well they execute. I was fearful that the game would be played like it was played that first quarter, that it would be four quarters of that. That's how much respect I have for Aaron and for their team as a whole and I think getting that separation made the difference and we were able to capitalize on it.

**Q. Coach, you talked about Paige's impact on the court but she's one of the only greats in this program that's been able to profit in college sports from NIL. Can you talk about how that has shaped her legacy, her impact on the program and if you think her experience as being on the front lines of that has pushed your program into a different space in that conversation.**

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, I think Paige is the poster child for how it's supposed to be. That's the way it's supposed to work. She came out of high school at a time when people weren't just getting paid to play. They don't get

paid to play. Bullshit. They're getting paid to play. When Paige came out, that wasn't necessarily the case yet. Schools were always going to do it. They just waited long enough to let the pretend keep pretending. She made a name for herself and set a standard for exactly why you're supposed to be able to appreciate this stuff. You go to college. You're the best player in the country, and everybody wants to be associated with you and the school doesn't give you a dime. You did it. You earned it because of who you are and your accomplishments on the court. Not just how you look. Not just because you're great on TikTok. You got to back it up. You have to have a game. There's a lot of people making a lot of money that have no game. To me, when that rule was put into effect and then as I see it out after five years, Paige should be on a postage stamp for this is what NIL is. This is how it's supposed to be done.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time. Appreciate it.

GENO AURIEMMA: Woo. You must know the bars are closing. (Laughter)

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