

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

Saturday, March 21, 2026

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

UConn Huskies

Geno Auriemma

Sarah Strong

Blanca Quiñonez

Media Conference

UConn 90, UTSA 52

THE MODERATOR: We welcome the UConn Huskies to the stage. We are joined by head coach Geno Auriemma along with student-athletes Blanca Quiñonez and Sarah Strong. Coach, we'll begin with an opening statement.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you. Yeah, that was -- I was telling the players after the game I've seen over the years how many times the first game looks kind of wonky, you know? You're kind of a little bit out of sorts from not playing and everybody is trying to hard to make it work, so it took us a little while to get going. Obviously we didn't shoot the ball great like we normally do, but I thought for the most part we did what we needed to do. We got the cobwebs off and we'll get ready for Monday night.

Q. Sarah, can you just talk about the difference that Blanca makes on the team and what she brings to you with her scoring ability and poise?

SARAH STRONG: Yeah, just a little spark off the bench. I feel like her defensive and offensive intensity get us going. She can do a little bit of everything. She can play everywhere and no one can really guard us, so that really helps us.

Q. Question for Sarah. During this March Madness, we've kind of seen certain teams take their opponent kind of loosely, but you guys stayed locked in from the beginning defensively. Can you talk about how important it was to set the tone defensively to start March Madness for you guys?



SARAH STRONG: Yeah, that's a big part of who we are. We focus on defense a lot and take pride in that. It's just the standard here. We can't underestimate any team, no matter what they're ranked, no matter what they have on their team. Just going into every game focused on defense because it's going to create for our offense.

Q. Blanca, can you just talk about your first NCAA Tournament game and how you felt out there? You looked like you were pretty relaxed.

BLANCA QUIÑONEZ: I just tried to approach the game the same way we did the last couple of games. Just tried to play hard, aggressive and just try to do the best for our team, so just locked in like everybody.

Q. This question is for both student-athletes. It's March, it's Women's History Month, so I like to ask this question in general. Who are the women in your lives that motivate you and what do you take away from Women's History Month?

SARAH STRONG: I would say my mom and all the women in my life. My family, my mom, my aunt, my grandma. They work so hard and I have always looked up to them and my mom paved the way for me to be who I am.

BLANCA QUIÑONEZ: Yeah, me too. I think my mom, she just teaches me everything and so I take pride of who she is and what she taught me when I was growing up, so.

Q. Sarah, can you talk about the contributions you guys got from Blanca and Kayleigh and others today when you had AZ and KK in foul trouble and working through that?

SARAH STRONG: Yeah, they made a really great impact when they came in the game. They were ready when they were called in, so that's really important for us. The special thing about our team is that anyone can come in and make a difference, make a big impact, so very happy with that.

Q. Sarah, can you just talk about the intensity that Heckel brings to the game? When you lose KK for a



little while, can't play with her and you really didn't notice on your defense.

SARAH STRONG: Yeah, like I said before, just people on the bench bringing a spark into the game when they come in and picking up where we left off. If someone is in foul trouble, the next person is up and they're ready to take care of the team.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, guys, congratulations.

All right. We'll now start with questions for coach.

Q. Geno, can you talk about what Blanca brings to this team? She doesn't seem like she's a freshman or a kid playing in her first NCAA Tournament game.

GENO AURIEMMA: No, there's definitely a more mature aspect to her than normal freshmen when they come in, especially given the fact that she wasn't here all summer so had to pick up things very quickly. There's skills that she has. There's a way of playing the game that she has the ability to impact it so many different ways and I think that's her biggest attribute is she's kind of fearless. She just pretty much plays the game, doesn't have any hesitation at all and like Sarah Strong said, you can use her in a lot of different ways, put her in a lot of different spots. I think she'll get more and more comfortable, hopefully, as the next couple of days come around and hopefully beyond that.

Q. Coach, I know with your busy schedule you don't have time to pay attention. The other night there was a number one Duke against number 16 team Sienna and they gave Duke a lot of problems all the way almost until the end of the game. After the game, one of the players from Duke said we thought it was going to be a cakewalk, these guys came to play, which is probably something a coach never wants to here out of a player's mouth.

So I guess my question is to you, even though Sarah alluded to it in the earlier question, from a coaching perspective, what do you see or what do you say to them that they don't have that mentality and that you guys never get put in that situation?

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, one would be that every team that's in the NCAA Tournament deserved to be in it because they accomplished something pretty significant during the course of the season, whether they won the regular season and had a great year. UT, you win a tournament, right? So they deserve to be in that spot and so they have a lot of pride in themselves and they're going

to come and compete and they're playing.

I'm sure the same as it was for the Siena kids, we're playing against Duke University and everything they stand for so there's a level of excitement. You come into this building and for the first time and you look around and those kids are naturally, they're, wow, I got to really play tonight. You have to respect that. As an opponent, you have to respect that. As a player, you have to respect the kids you're playing against.

It's not until after the game that you can decide whether it was a cakewalk or whether it was a battle and I think any time you go into a game disrespecting your opponent, disrespecting the game. You're really setting yourself for something bad down the road thinking that I can turn it on depending on the opponent. I'll bring my A game when the opponent deserves it, again, which is disrespectful to the team you're playing right now.

So we just try to stay if that mindset. We have a lot of respect for everybody that we play and we're going to treat everybody exactly the same, because you know what? You can go 7-33 from the three-point line against that team we just played or we can make a team of you guys and go 7-33. You're not going to just come in and shoot the ball great every time. So you better be ready to win other ways than just we're going to come out there and take all the shots we normally take and win 100-10. It's not going to work that way. Never had, never will. Not at UConn anyway.

Q. You talked about not shooting the ball well. Sarah Strong was able to stretch the floor and not down two three pointers. Can you talk about the match-up, the mismatches she is able to create when she's able to step out and knock down that long ball?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, we get infatuated with that sometimes. When I was a kid growing up in Philadelphia, the Sixers traded Wilt Chamberlain. For some reason he thought Los Angeles was a nicer city than Philadelphia. I guess being born and raised there, he had enough of Philly, so they traded him to the Lakers and one of the guys we got back in the trade was a shooting guard named Archie Clark. Great player. Fun to watch. Really fun to watch. They asked him one time what's the key? What makes you go? How do you approach games? He goes, well, I shoot until I get hot and then I keep shooting. I thought damn. That could be like you're 0-20. Doesn't matter. I'm going to keep shooting until I get hot.

That sounds good and that's a lot of fun, but I don't know that you need nine guys on your team like that. I think we have a lot of guys on our team that go we keep shooting

them, they'll start going in. Well, that's how you lose games.

So you have to come into these games and you got to go, we got to get the ball to Sarah more in the lane. We're 8-11 in the line and at one time, 1-17 from three. We can't be all one way. I think that's where Sarah comes in because we can get a three from her. We can get an offensive rebound from her. We can get a post-up from her. We can get a steal from her for a layup. There's just so many ways that she can put points on the board and when the other guys are making a bunch of threes, great.

Nights like tonight, days like today is when you realize how much she adds to your team in so many ways. So many ways. That's why she's the best.

Q. How valuable is somebody like Kayleigh Heckel when you do have foul trouble and she can come in and just keep your defense right on point and produce offensively for you?

GENO AURIEMMA: That was the whole point of bringing her in. I think the luxury that we have is KK's had an amazing season and has done an incredible job in the post-season with the Big East Tournament and was really, really good in the third quarter.

You can't think that nothing is ever going to get in the way and fouls get in the way, injuries get in the way. Things happen and we're very fortunate to be able to have Kayleigh come off the bench because she is -- she's kind of relentless when it comes to the defensive stuff that KK does. She brings some of that. She's really good at getting to the basket. She'll make a three. She'll kind of do a bunch of little things that -- and she'll hopefully, we only had ten turnovers today and that's what you worry about when one of your lead guards is missing. We're just very fortunate that we have that luxury.

Q. Coach, your season isn't over, but you have a few seniors on this team, like Azzi Fudd and others. Can you speak to maybe some of the best memories you have of your seniors during this last ride per se?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, that group has been in a lot of big games. They've been on a national championship team. They've been through some of the hardest times ever at Connecticut with our injuries, had to play under a lot of adversity. Some of them have had their career interrupted by serious injuries, missing a year, two years.

So it's really -- I think we're grateful and it's been a lot of fun to see them stay healthy, number one. Experience this undefeated season so far. All of them, except Azzi, they're

in new roles. That's a -- and obviously they all want to end the season, end their careers the right way. Hopefully they'll get a chance to do that.

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