

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

Sunday, March 22, 2026

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

UConn Huskies Coach Geno Auriemma Sarah Strong Azzi Fudd

Media Conference

Q. Sarah, I know you have a basketball background when it comes to your family. I was wondering how much you lean on that in the tournament and when you're facing a lot of pressure.

SARAH STRONG: I would say I lean on them a lot. I don't think my parents -- I don't know if my mom played in the NCAA tournament before. Oh, the one time.

But yeah, they're there for support. I talk to them about any game that I go into, how to get my mentality right and just what I'm looking for. But it doesn't really change anything. I've always done that.

Q. Azzi, this will be your final game in Gampel. What can you say about the environment you've played in the last couple of years here?

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, Gampel has been home for the last five years, and the environment is second to none. The fans, the students, everything about this place, it's the best place to play. I feel like even when you get to just experience one game here, you can see why it's called the basketball capital of the world.

But I'm super excited, happy to have the students back on campus, happy to just be able to have one last game here with my teammates.

Q. What's on the initial scouting report for Syracuse? They have a pretty talented freshman big. What do you think you need to do to slow her down and get a win tomorrow?



SARAH STRONG: I would say just play team defense. Not any one is going to be guarding her. We all have to be in each other's helps and be ready to make up for each other's mistakes.

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, it's definitely going to be a team defense kind of day. They have a lot of talented players, so just to know our scout, the ins and outs and their tendencies.

Q. Azzi, you're the best team in the nation, undefeated. What makes you guys so good? What are the specific things that you guys do so well?

AZZI FUDD: I think our defensive pressure. I think our chemistry on the court has gotten so much better throughout the year and just how we can be on the same page, whether that's on offense, defense, knowing what the person next to us likes to do, when they're going to cut, where they like the ball to shoot, where to be on rotations, and yeah, I think offensively I think we have so much talent and so much depth. I think those are some good keys.

Q. Geno, last year Syracuse didn't make the post season, had 12 wins, and to go from that to how well they played this season, does it not surprise you that it's Felisha who got the team back where they used to be? Is it not surprising that it's her who created such a turnaround?

JAN JENSEN: Yeah, of course. The program's tradition years ago, years ago, I actually saw Barb Jacobson in the audience yesterday, and that tradition seemed to have gone -- we played them in the championship game in 2016 I want to say.

You know, things can kind of go sideways pretty quickly, and I think Felisha came in and kind of started to get the thing back to where it was. It's never a straight line uphill, going upwards, I should say.

She does an incredible job of identifying talent. She took a big chance on that freshman. Like whoever thought she would be good. She's like the best player we've seen this year.



So when you bring in a kid like that, good things happen.

Q. When you watch Syracuse, do you see kind of them playing with that chip on their shoulder mentality, leave it all out there, when you see them play this year?

JAN JENSEN: I think anybody that plays in the NCAA Tournament certainly has some sort of motivation, whatever it is. I'm not privy to their inner workings; I don't know what chip would be on their shoulder other than they maybe feel like they're not getting the recognition they deserve or that last year they didn't get in and they had to work pretty hard this year.

I think every team plays -- you hope that every team that's in the tournament plays with a sort of, we've got something to prove. They always, anytime I've been around them, and we played them two years ago in this tournament, incredibly competitive game, so I wouldn't expect there to be any different tomorrow.

Q. Coach Jack was up here a little bit earlier sharing the story about the time you guys recruited her at Virginia. What do you remember about that first time meeting her and your relationship with her as it's gone on?

JAN JENSEN: Yeah, I was talking to somebody about that yesterday, that I guess when you've been around a long time -- but I do remember going up to Syracuse and Nottingham High School and her coach, Coach Spease, was really a delight to work with.

Everybody knew Felisha was a really good player and was going to be a really good college player. So that's when I first had any contact with her.

Then I got the job here at Connecticut and we have to play against them for a couple years, and then we've stayed in touch. We've talked a lot, been involved in talking to her about some of the jobs that she's been involved with, and I'm really proud of her.

I think she -- it's really good when a young coach gets an opportunity. She got an opportunity at Indiana, and it didn't pan out. A lot of times when things like that happen, a lot of young coaches get buried and they never have an opportunity and they kind of have to work their way up through mid majors and they never get another chance.

I'm incredibly thrilled that she had an opportunity to get back to that level, and she's made the most of it.

She's an upbeat person. She's got a great personality. When I talked to John Wildhack about hiring her, I said, wow, you look at your men's coach, you need to bring in a coach that smiles once in a while, is happy-go-lucky, enjoys life, so you can balance out what's going on on the men's side. I think that got her the job. And a phone call to me from Boeheim.

Q. Love that. You referenced Uche Izoje being one of the best players you're going up against this season so far. What about her game makes her such a unique talent and how do you game plan against someone like that?

JAN JENSEN: Yeah, a unique talent. I would say that's absolutely true. For a young player, who's not so young, for a first-year player to be able to just have a command of her game -- she knows exactly what shots she wants. She knows when she wants it and from where, and there's not a lot you can do to keep her from getting it because she's longer than you are and she can finish at the basket.

She made six or seven of those 15-footers, 16-footers yesterday.

So yeah, she's a complete player. It's a tough matchup for anybody because I don't know that I've seen a player that we've played against anyway this year that has all those combinations that she has.

I think she's got a tremendous future ahead of her. I don't know when her birthday is, but mine is tomorrow, and I wished hers was tomorrow so she could get drafted and not play against us tomorrow night.

Q. Coach, as you mentioned, Syracuse --

JAN JENSEN: Is anybody left up in Syracuse?

Q. As you mentioned, Syracuse came to this building and played you guys to a pretty close game two years ago. Obviously the circumstances are different this time around, but what do you see from this Syracuse team that's different, and what about your team is different?

JAN JENSEN: Well, from two years ago, yeah, obviously we're different. Obviously they're different. But things are still similar. Their length, they're able defensively to kind of force you out of some of your stuff. They play really well together.

Hard when you come into the tournament and you lose a guard that you've been counting on all year, so that's tough. And Felisha has done a great job navigating that.

Yeah, they're a little bit different than they were two years ago. We're a little bit different than we were two years ago.

But our style of play is the same. Theirs is not that that much different; ours is not that much different.

I watched them yesterday, and when you see people on film it's one thing, but when you see them up close, they're physical. They're aggressive. Yeah, it's not an easy one. Not an easy one tomorrow.

Q. You lose Paige Bueckers but you had four No. 1 recruits coming back. How have they adapted to being on their toes every day, they've got to be the two top scorers? How do they complement Azzi and Sarah, how do they complement each other on the court?

JAN JENSEN: Who are you referring to?

Q. Azzi Fudd and Sarah Strong.

JAN JENSEN: Yeah, the two of them, I mean, I don't know that you win the games that we won, that many games. It's like last year, I don't know that you win the National Championship without two or three really, really good players and then a group of players that are okay playing their role every day, every night.

For Sarah and Azzi, yeah, they inherit by virtue of their talent, they inherit that role of you have to be the go-to guys at UConn, and there's no shying away from it, and they've handled it pretty well, I think.

They don't shy away from it, and they -- it's hard to put yourself in their shoes, especially Azzi when you're a senior and everybody is looking at you. You've got to do this, you've got to do that, you've got to -- it's a very challenging, pressure-packed spot to be in, and it takes somebody pretty unique to be able to handle those things, especially here at UConn.

I think she's handled it great.

Going forward, all you can do is put yourself into positions. But it's not going to be Azzi and Sarah. They could both get 30 and nobody else does their job, and we could lose.

So I think the two of them are going to have to set a tone for us, but at the same time, like yesterday, we need more contributions from other players in order to get this done.

Q. You talked a little yesterday about Kayleigh Heckel's unrelenting spirit, especially on the defensive end of the floor. Is that something you've seen her

develop throughout the course of the year, or has that always been her and it's just been accentuated the last couple weeks?

JAN JENSEN: Well, I remember seeing that in high school when she played in high school, and we may have talked about this before, but she was kind of wild and out of control a lot in high school, and then she would have flashes of being in like really, really, really solid. I think those things start to wear off the more basketball you play.

I think she's in a really good place right now where she knows how to use her quickness. She knows how to use her speed and when to be what, what we need her to be when. That comes with just playing, being in those situations, playing with really good players around you.

I think when she was younger, she tried to do way more than she needed to maybe because she had to. I don't know. But I think she's fit in great, and she's doing exactly what we brought her here for.

Q. Away from tomorrow's game aside, this is the sixth time Syracuse has played here since 2017, all coming in the postseason. Coach Jack joked about we'd love to see you on a neutral floor. Do you think anytime down the road there will be a time you play Syracuse on a neutral site or come to the Dome?

JAN JENSEN: Well, we did come to the Dome a bunch of times when we were in the Big East and then we wanted to come to the Dome when we had Stewie and they didn't want to play us.

But there are a lot more neutral games being set up all over the country, and we play in a bunch of them. So who knows. We might end up playing them somewhere, somehow.

I saw somebody talk about neutral games, neutral site games and these games, these first two games. Then I watch some men's games and the buildings are half full but the tickets are all sold, supposedly.

If somebody could tell me, listen, next year we're going to play on neutral sites and all the tickets are sold ahead of time, then I would go, let's do it. But until then, I think the players would rather play where there's a full house.

Men's basketball is the only sport in college that doesn't fight all season for home court or home field advantage. It's crazy, right? But because they can. They've earned the right to do that. I don't know that anybody else is in that situation right now. I don't think there's another sport on campus that you could say, let's play on a neutral site.

Even college football has gone to home games in the playoffs. Financially somebody is going to have to prove that it's doable, and then I think we would all do it. We would all say, okay, let's do it. But it's got to be financially successful. Or the players got to take a pay cut. Good luck with that. (Laughter.)

Q. Coach Jack obviously credited a lot of UConn's success to you and rightfully so but she made note of the rest of your coaching staff. What can you talk about them and how much help and success they have been towards everything that you guys have accomplished both this year and in years past, especially with the tight turnaround, just two days between your first-round game and now this game?

JAN JENSEN: Yeah, I like the fact that we've had, for the most part, over the entire time that I've been here, we've had a lot of stability in our coaching staff. We don't necessarily -- we haven't necessarily had to deal with assistant coaches that come here a year or two years and then they're gone.

Obviously Chris Dailey has been here a long, long time, as long as I have. Jamelle was here and then went on to be a head coach and then came back, Tania Cardoza was here, went on to be a head coach, and then came back. Morgan has coached at a lot of other places after here and became a head coach and came back.

So I'm very fortunate that I have three coaches on my staff that were head coaches and understand what it is that we're doing. It's probably a resource that very few other programs in America have.

It's not a big secret how you get to be where we are, how you win. You've got really good people that bring from really good players and really good people, and they're really good coaches, and they coach the hell out of these kids, and we win. I'm sure all the teams that are playing in the tournament that keep advancing have similar stories.

Q. I was just wondering what you think the biggest pieces of growth you've seen from Sarah Strong from year one to year two?

JAN JENSEN: I would say more comfortable. More comfortable in her on the court and off the court, more assertive. Not quite where I want her to be.

There's a look that she has where when it's time, there's not as much of a hesitation as sometimes there was last year of deferring to Paige or older players. There's still some things that I think we need to obviously keep adding

to that, but just her comfort level, how there's no hesitation whatsoever. There used to be a little bit of should I do this, should I not, this guy is open -- there's still a lot of that, but I just think there's a much more I've-got-this mentality than last year just trying to fit in.

Yeah, she's quite different. She's quite different.

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