

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

Monday, March 23, 2026

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

**UConn Huskies**

**Coach Geno Auriemma**

**Sarah Strong**

**Azzi Fudd**

Media Conference

UConn 98, Syracuse 45

THE MODERATOR: At this time we are joined by Head Coach Geno Auriemma, along with student-athletes Azzi Fudd and Sarah Strong. We will begin with an opening statement from.

GENO AURIEMMA: Coach thank you. You know, you go into these games and you're kind of all over the place trying to think of how it's going to play out, all the different scenarios. And I can honestly say I'm not sure that any of the scenarios that I thought about involved us going on a run like we did that first half.

We were pretty focused, and we were pretty locked in together, and that's the best half of basketball, best 20 minutes that I've seen in a long, long time from our team, not just this team, but it's happened other times, but this is about as good as it gets.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

**Q. Azzi, I know it's gotta be difficult, but can you try to describe what it was like for you today just going out 34 points in your final game at Gampel and seemingly making every basket?**

AZZI FUDD: I think the best -- I mean what it felt like to me, I felt like I reached full state for a second. My teammates were just finding me, sending me great screens. I don't even know. I feel like I wasn't really thinking. When I was open, I was like, okay, I'm going to shoot it.



**Q. Azzi, just what's it like obviously in this atmosphere? I know at the end you took a photo with the student section, but it being your final game here at Gampel, what's it feel like?**

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, Gampel has been home for the last five years, and when people say like no place compares, it really doesn't. No environment, the crowd, the fans, the students, everything about this place is amazing. So to be able to play here one last time, have a great team win like we did tonight, couldn't have asked for anything better.

**Q. Azzi, do you have a favorite moment at Gampel Pavilion during your five years here?**

AZZI FUDD: I don't know. There's been so many great moments, great wins. I don't know if I can pick just one. Tonight would be up there.

**Q. Azzi, why was it important for you to go to the student section and thank them, take pictures with them today? And what did that feel like to have them all hugging you, surrounding you?**

AZZI FUDD: Yeah. It's incredible. You really feel the love in here every night, from whether it's student section or the rest of the fans. But for them to show up every single game, it means a lot. I mean, we know how hard it is to be a student here. They've got class tomorrow, had class today. But they come every single game, bring the energy. And to hear them non stop throughout the game, they're like our sixth man.

**Q. Sarah, can you just talk about the game she played. You're an elite player who's had great games before. But have you seen anything quite like that? She just couldn't miss it seems like?**

SARAH STRONG: That's kind of what Azzi does is not miss. But I'm happy to see her at her most confident self. That's going to be really important in the long run, and I'm really happy for her.

**Q. Sarah, what Coach said about that was as locked in as you guys have been to start a game in the first half.**



**You went on a 31-0 run. What was your mood to start the game, kind of, and did you feel like you were that, like ready to go for this game? Is that one of the best feelings that you've had in a game this year?**

SARAH STRONG: I would say so. I feel like it started at practice and shooting around, I felt like we were all on the same page and all focused on our goal, focused on the other team. So I think it started there before anything.

**Q. For either of you, just kind of what was the expectation of Syracuse's defense going in and how did it live up to that or maybe not live up to that and how do you think that contributed to that early run?**

AZZI FUDD: I mean, we knew that they liked to play zone. So we worked a lot on our zone offense today, yesterday, just working on moving, cutting. And, yeah, I thought we did a good job of just being aggressive, finding the open spots.

We ran all of our plays the same, but just always being ready for the ball. Where can we flash, where can we get open, and I thought the ball was moving really well today.

**Q. Azzi, I know you and Caroline have shared kind of a special relationship over the years just playing together. For this to be your last game together at Gampel Pavilion with all you guys have gone through, injuries and everything she's gone through, for her to get her opportunity there in the fourth quarter, big ovation from the crowd, how cool was that and what does she mean to you?**

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, Caroline, as everyone knows means a lot to me. We've been through a lot these five years, but then also having been best friends since seventh grade, I mean, it's just amazing to see how she's grown and to be here with her. Not many people can say they went to college with their best friend, went through all this. So to see her, to get to share this moment with her meant a lot, and to see her go out there and do her thing was great.

**Q. Azzi, can you talk about that 31-0 run? What felt like was going right during it, and how great was your defense in that first half? You guys just seemed totally locked in.**

AZZI FUDD: Yeah. And I think our defense really started with Serah Williams tonight. She really took pride in her matchup. And, I mean, I think she held their best scorer to 4 or 6 when she was in the game.

So for her to start the game out like that, really taking pride in that, and all of us helped out, trying to have her back

whenever we could. But I think tonight it started with Serah Williams' intensity, and we just fed off her.

**Q. As you're going through that run, does it feel like you're just in complete control of the game or just playing with friends out on the play ground with no cares? What was that like?**

AZZI FUDD: Yeah, the way we started the game is definitely what we work for in practice. All the different situations coaches throw at us. This is the kind of game that we hope to play after going through all that is to just play our best basketball, get stops, kick it up, get threes, get layups in transition and then to feel that energy from the crowd, just keep that rolling.

**Q. Sarah, you all had active hands on defense throughout the entire game, a lot of steals, blocks, forced turnovers. What specifically are you all practicing to kind of make sure you can take the ball away and contest shots without fouling?**

SARAH STRONG: I mean, pretty much what you said, just trying to contest without fouling. They call fouls in practice, and we're used to hearing the whistle, but we try to play defense with our hands up and being each other's help, so that way we don't have to foul them.

**Q. Azzi, like where do you feel like you've grown the most in your career from where you started to where you are now?**

AZZI FUDD: I think my defense has gotten a lot better, and then I think my -- I'd say my off-the-ball movement has gotten a lot better as well.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time. Congratulations on the win. All right. We'll now start with questions for Coach.

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't know how I could ever follow that up. That was riveting.

**Q. Geno, what was that performance from Azzi in the first half, you took her out with a couple of seconds left and as she ran to the bench you kind of just like grinned at her. Like what was it like to watch her do that in her last game here?**

GENO AURIEMMA: Um, um, you know, her teammates got her the ball and they put their hands up. She could high five them easily. Didn't have to work real hard to find them. They were wide open on the bench. (Laughter). Yeah. That's about it.

You know, you're supposed to have fun when you play this game, right? I mean it's still a game. It's called basketball, but it's the game of basketball, and you're supposed to have fun playing it. Sometimes in this environment that gets lost, you know. That we try really, really hard to make it fun, and I get a kick out of watching them celebrate each others' achievements. That's the highest compliment that you can give players is that they enjoy when other people are successful.

And I can't say enough about our student section. Today was the first day of school for second semester, and I don't know, looked like there was like 3,000 people up there or something like that, I don't know. But they had incredible energy, and they were like that all year, and it just adds, you know, when you're watching kids that you go to class with and you're having a blast, then you're watching us play the way we played, it really -- it made it a real meaningful, special night for these guys.

**Q. Coach, yesterday you said that Uche Izoje was one of the best players your team has seen this season, and your team did a really good job of limiting her tonight. Was that more a testament to the defensive identity of your team and being tenacious on the ball and making things uncomfortable or was there anything you did in particular to make life difficult for her?**

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't know that there was anything out of the ordinary. When you're playing against a player that when they catch it, they're really hard to guard, I think the first order of business, I think you've gotta make it difficult for them to get the normal amount of touches that they would get in a game.

And then making sure that where those touches come from are not exactly where she likes to catch them. So I thought we did a really good job with that.

We got great help, you know, from our guards. But when she gets a little bit of space, when she's able to get herself to her spot, I don't know that you could do anything about it. You just have to appreciate and admire how she scores.

The other thing, too, I think the pace that we were playing at, I think that got, she's a first-year kid playing. And sometimes the best way to guard a really, really good player is get the pace going where they need a breather. So you get them off the court.

**Q. Geno, can you talk about the job that Serah Williams did against Uche? I know it was a team game, the guards helped out a lot, but she seemed pretty intense today and focused, like she was ready to**

**go.**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah. I do think that. And the impact that she had -- the way Azzi impacted the game, obviously, was spectacular, but Serah Williams impacted the game significantly, and I think she got one bucket.

But the way she played defensively, the rebounding, just the presence that she had, I thought it was as engaged and as energetic and as assertive as I've seen her. The points don't reflect it, but everything else does.

**Q. Geno, you said that that was the best half you'd seen in a while. What was the mood in the halftime locker room?**

GENO AURIEMMA: The mood in the halftime locker room, I refrain, like the kid got a wide-open layup and Heckel and Ashlynn Shade weren't there. So that took up half of my talk. I was pissed.

Kidding.

There wasn't much to talk about. There wasn't much that we could say. There wasn't a lot of adjustments that we needed to make. There weren't concerns that we had going into the second half. We just talked about keeping the ball moving and making sure we find the right spots, and we didn't pressure any more.

We just -- and I think that affected us negatively in the third quarter. I think we lost a little bit of our edge that we had all first half. I think we got the job done that we had to do, and really wasn't a lot to say at halftime, really. Not much. Just that keep doing what we're doing because we were really good.

**Q. Coach, going back to that first half, can you describe what you were thinking on the sidelines seeing that 30-0 run unfold in front of your eyes?**

GENO AURIEMMA: You don't really know how many it is. You just know that we're getting the shots we want to get. You're surprised a little bit because you don't expect it to be like that, but you don't know the number. You'd have to look at stats sheet and go, hey, we went on a 30-0 run.

But when you have really good players that want to play together and they want to share the ball, things like that can happen. You know, watching the way we passed the ball, watching Azzi, and Blanca had a great game, you know.

So you just marvel at the things that they can do when they're all in sync, because it doesn't happen very often, or

often enough, I should say. But what I was watching that first half, I mean, I knew I was watching something that was pretty -- you know, it reminded me of some of the NCAA Final Four games last year. It looked a lot like that.

**Q. This one is just an easy one to close out, but where does this win rank among the biggest you've ever received?**

GENO AURIEMMA: I don't know how many games have been played on March 23rd. I'm not sure. Probably the best one ever was in Philadelphia at the plastic we won to go to the Final Four. So that one was pretty memorable. And I was young. (Laughs). That was memorable, too. Although a distant memorable.

**Q. Geno, you had mentioned the student section, but there was a time here a while ago where you were drawing 4,000, 5,000 for the first couple rounds of the games for the NCAA Tournament. It was just mind boggling. Can you just talk about how fulfilling it is to have the fans back again, a couple sellouts this year, a couple sellouts last year? Seems like they're appreciating you guys a little bit more again.**

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah. I think one of the issues that started to happen here a while back was I thought the ticket prices were a little bit out of hand relative to what they were during the regular season sometimes. I thought some of the game times at times were not conducive to it.

I think people got spoiled and said, ah, I've seen them play enough. I will wait to go to the regionals when they could drive to the regionals, back in the day, when they had a regional in your region. That's why they're called regionals.

And I think a lot of these kids now that school here have grown up with this. I think social media has made it more than just let's go to a basketball game. It's become kind of an event thing. And so you can go, watch a game, take selfies, do Instagram, do some TikTok videos and interact with people and get caught up in the excitement of the game.

So a lot has changed since the mid 90s, early 2000s. So we're in an era now where I think our students grew up with this, and there's nothing like being here. And we probably have the best student section in the country when you look up there, and the kids notice. They know. And they can tell how much energy they bring into this building.

And forever grateful to Teds and Huskies and those guys for providing the impetus for the energy that they bring. I owe them one.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

GENO AURIEMMA: Thank you.

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