

NCAA Women's Regional Semifinals and Finals: Albany

Friday, March 29, 2019

Albany, New York



Geno Auriemma Christyn Williams Napheesa Collier Crystal Dangerfield Connecticut Huskies

UConn - 69, UCLA - 61

GENO AURIEMMA: The game kind of speaks for itself. You know, I don't think there's anything that came easy from the very opening tip. You know, it was a struggle. We had to work really, really hard for everything we got. There was a tremendous amount of pressure on our guys to make plays. Every pass was contested. Every cut was contested. Every shot was difficult to come by.

There were a lot of opportunities for us in the second half -- because we only played four and a half players, so to speak. We just found a way, somehow -- When we really needed to make some shots, when we needed to make a play. A lot of times - I tell the players this all the time - nobody is going to trick anybody this time of year with some fancy plays. You know, you either have players that can make big-time plays or you don't. And we had these three guys up here, they made some big plays at crucial moments. That's what it takes to win at this time of the year.

Q. Crystal, that fourth quarter run you guys scored the first six points in a 15-4 run, I think you had 9 of your 15 in that stretch. Did you have to do something offensively to get this team going? What was the difference in that fourth quarter for the team?

CRYSTAL DANGERFIELD: It was really taking what the defense was giving us. Coach challenged us at halftime to get into the paint, not really looking for fouls, but just going in there to score, and he wanted to make sure that we had a balance of inside shots and outside shots.

Q. Napheesa, can you address what Coach was saying, just they are so -- UCLA, not that you guys aren't incredibly athletic, but they're so athletic and

they just get in your business on everything? Can you talk about that and how you were able to keep your composure with that?

NAPHEESA COLLIER: Yeah, they're incredibly athletic and physical, and they're all kind of the same height. Our biggest thing tonight was rebounding, and while these two did amazing today, especially as they addressed Crystal in the fourth quarter, I was really proud of Megan Walker and how we talked before the game about how it's really going to decide us rebounding and boxing out, and I thought she did an amazing job. I think she had 11 rebounds, so I definitely want to give a lot of credit to her.

I think we're all going to need a soak and an ice bath tonight. It was really physical. But we grinded it out, and I'm really proud of how we played tonight.

Q. Napheesa, you talked about how physical it was. Talk about how you guys went in the second half, the 1-3-1 zone press, you guys kind of stagnated the offense. Do you think that was the turning point of the game?

NAPHEESA COLLIER: Yeah, I thought our press was really disruptive for them. I thought it made them kind of slow down and have to do things that they were not comfortable with, and the press is something that we like to do a lot. I think we're pretty good at it and we do disrupt teams, so I thought that was a good turning point for us.

Q. Christyn, first off, how are you feeling after that big leap? And second of all, can you just talk about how you came out of the game? You really started the aggressiveness for the whole team.

CHRISTYN WILLIAMS: Yeah, I'm okay, by the way. I was just going after the ball. I'm perfectly fine. You know, Coach always is on me about being aggressive from the jump, so that was my mindset going into the game is being aggressive at all times, and I thought I executed well. So yeah, that was my mindset.

Q. Napheesa, you've gotten to a point where the 20/10s are just automatic, and it seems like you decide early on to take control of these games. I am wondering how much of that is directly coming from you and how much of that is coming from just what defenses are allowing to happen.

NAPHEESA COLLIER: I think it's a mixture of a lot of

things. Obviously I try to work as hard as I can to get position and get in a place where I can be successful with the ball, but my team does a great job also of getting me the ball, like I said, in the places that I want to be successful. I think just being aggressive from the jump is what I've been trying to do a lot, and, like I said, kind of just finding position early and sealing, I guess. I don't know.

Q. I'm curious when that changed for you, when you decided it was important to be aggressive right away? At what point in your UConn career did that happen?

NAPHEESA COLLIER: I mean, it kind of happened more so my sophomore year just because my freshman year I was just a freshman floating around and didn't really know what I was doing. My sophomore year I knew Kayla and I would have a bigger role, so I knew I would have to be more aggressive. And I thought I kind of got away from that last year, so I knew coming into this year that I never wanted to do that again and I wanted to kind of change my mindset and never, ever doubt myself or be timid or anything like that. So I kind of came into this year knowing that I wanted to be more aggressive.

Q. Crystal, you guys got down a little bit in that third quarter; how important was it for you guys to stop that at five and then just kind of hang back in until you went on that run in the fourth quarter?

CRYSTAL DANGERFIELD: It was huge. You know, basketball is a game of runs. We were going to have ours, they were going to have theirs, and I think it was a matter of getting one stop. And once we did that, I think we got out in transition a little, Lou got that big steal, we were hitting our shots, going to the free-throw line and things of that nature, and I think that really turned the game for us.

It's not always going to go in your favor, but I think tonight we did what was necessary, getting a big rebound like Phee said about Meg, she came in and did her job tonight, and I think that was the game changer.

Q. Crystal, coach was saying at this time of the year it's about making big plays. Did you have a moment, you look up at the scoreboard, you guys are down by one, you've got 10 minutes left, did you have a moment in yourself where you thought, this is my time, I have to make big plays?

CRYSTAL DANGERFIELD: Not necessarily that it's my time but it's just that a play had to be made. He kind of said it after the game, we didn't know where it was going to come from, but it was definitely going to happen. And that's the kind of confidence that we've kind of grown to have in each other over the course of

this season.

Again, it was just really taking what the defense was giving us, and that was really where the run was coming from.

Q. Napheesa, it just seemed in that fourth quarter you guys stayed so poised, like Crystal just said, you kind of knew that was coming. Just the composure that you guys had when UCLA was jacking up shots and everything. Can you speak to that for a second?

NAPHEESA COLLIER: Well, I think we've had a lot of practice, honestly, with it this year. There's been a lot of games where we've been down at one point, at some point in the game. And so as hard as it was obviously to lose those games and to kind of have a different dynamic this year, having that experience is what I think is going to help us down the road and helped us today because we're not getting flustered in those situations. We know that we've been there. We know that we have the fight to push back and to come back from those, which is exactly what we did tonight. Like I said, as hard as it was to go through it during the year grinding it out, I think it's definitely something that's prepared us for this tournament.

Q. Coach, last three years you've seen Crystal Dangerfield really develop in front of your eyes, taking on bigger roles, dribble drive penetration. Overall from freshman year to now, what do you see as her biggest asset to now?

GENO AURIEMMA: I mean, basketball always, as much as people want to say when they talk about a dominant big man, basketball is dictated by the people that have the ball in their hands the majority of the time. It's always been my feeling that if you have really good guards on your team, then you have a chance to have a really good team, provided you have some of the other pieces.

But I think Crystal's biggest adjustment or biggest growth has come from taking on more personal accountability, more responsibility. I think as you grow in our program, you start to see that at some point it's going to be all on you. Her freshman year and her sophomore year, she had a lot of people around her that if she didn't play well or something didn't go right, they could bail her out. And now she's in a situation where she looks around and says, "It's all on me". And I think sometimes that forces you to hold yourself more accountable, to understand, like today, if I don't make these plays, it's not going to happen and we're going to lose, because I can't expect Christyn to do it. And Lou isn't going to have the ball in her hands, I've got to get her the ball. But in the meantime I've got to make sure we win this game. That's part of growing up for sure.

Q. Geno, you mentioned they were four and a half. Was it Lou's back was the issue today? I assume that's the half you're referring to.

GENO AURIEMMA: Well, we got some great mileage out of Liv. I thought Olivia played really, really well in the minutes that she got. Yeah, I mean, Lou's mobility is not the same as it was. I'm sure that her back is still an issue. But it was made -- it was compounded by how long and how athletic they are and how physical the game was. You would never know it, but it was kind of physical. We didn't necessarily shoot a lot of free throws, but it was physical. I don't know that Lou's mobility was where it needs to be, and she really struggled. Really struggled.

We went in at halftime, what, up 5? And Lou and Crystal didn't score. So we kind of felt okay. I thought Lou would do something in the second half, you know. I never thought that her big moment would be on a defensive play. That's like the biggest shocker of the night. And a three-point play.

Q. I'm just curious, seeing Cori and what she's built from the outside, a couple years ago they played you relatively tough, but obviously it wasn't at the same level, wasn't the same sort of challenge. It is in the Sweet 16 now. I'm wondering what that view is for you from the outside, but also what it says about the state of women's basketball, that there are more Coris building, there are more programs that can challenge and around that wasn't necessarily a challenge in the past for bluebloods?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, well, generally speaking, two things have to happen to try to even the playing field. The teams that are at the top have to come back a little bit, and the teams that are trying to catch them have to come up a little bit. Because for a bunch of years, the teams at the top, and I know because we were one of them, we just kept getting better every year. So no matter how hard other people worked, the gap was always the same and was actually getting worse.

Well, that started to change. The teams like UCLA with what Cori has done, they've gotten progressively better over the years, and the cycle was going to change. All those teams that used to dominate the top, they've kind of come back to earth a little bit, so it's made them much more competitive game. More people were in the mix, you know.

We've been to, what, 11 straight Final Fours? That's probably not -- I mean, not healthy for me, but it's probably something that should be impossible to do in the real world of competitive sports. It should not be possible to go that many years in a row. And it's going

to get much, much more difficult each and every year from here on in.

And there's a lot of good young coaches out there. And at a place like UCLA, you almost have to say to yourself, how could you not? UCLA, Oregon, Oregon State, just those three out there. She's done a great job. She's done a great job.

Q. The question I'm pretty sure you've heard this many times as the tournament started, you came in as a No. 2 seed, which was shocking to a lot of people, and even though you're winning, you're not blowing teams out by 40 or 50 points. How much of an edge does that give you going forward, and how much edge has it given you in this tournament?

GENO AURIEMMA: That's a hard one to answer because a lot of times those emotional things, that doesn't last a long time. When people talk about you bring a ton of emotion to a game, at some point you're going to have to win the game with how good you are, not how emotional you are. So there was a point in today's game during one of the time-outs where we looked like we were in trouble. The look on their face looked like they were in trouble because we couldn't get anything to drop, we couldn't get a call. They started burying threes. So it was like, well, what are we going to do, we can't guard them inside if we have to go out. So we're going to have to give something up. And it looked like we were like searching. But then all of a sudden, something happened, and I think they remembered that we're UConn, and this is what we do. And it doesn't always work, don't get me wrong. Sometimes it just doesn't happen. But you know, there's just enough times with four, five minutes left in the game. Our kids need to be reminded sometimes, we're still UConn, you know. We're not going to die easily. It's not going to be that easy to get rid of us.

I think that does come from this little whatever you're carrying around with you that no one has picked us to win it, I don't think. But I don't know that that's going to help you win a game.

Q. Olivia had a huge block in the beginning of the fourth quarter; what did she mean to the shift in momentum obviously defensively for you guys?

GENO AURIEMMA: Yeah, it changes what we look like, obviously, against their size and their athletic ability. They're just bigger than us at every position on the front line. So putting Liv in there changes what we look like. So we look like -- I can never use the word "Olivia" and "imposing" in the same sentence, but we look long, and it is kind of disruptive, and she's able to just by her presence -- I think she was a big, big factor in tonight's game, even without having to score a lot of points or do anything spectacular on the stat sheet.

Just having her out there I think was -- and she looked like she belonged out there. Like her look on the bench was like, Yeah, I got this, Coach.

Q. Did you remind them that you're still UConn and that you're not going to die easily, like you said in that time-out? You said they needed to be reminded or they figured it out themselves?

GENO AURIEMMA: No, I didn't say anything. I think C.D. noticed that it didn't come from me or any of the coaches. I think it took us getting down five to really change how we were looking at the game. I think the whole time we were winning, when we were up, it was like, yeah, okay, well, we'll figure out a way to win it. But when we got down five, I think there was a sense of, uh-oh, now we need to dig down deeper and we need to find something. And we did. We did. It was -- I was probably more proud of them in that fourth quarter, this particular group of players, than any time since they've been at Connecticut because this one they really -- it was all on their shoulders and they had to win it. Gabby is not going to bail you out with some superhuman plays. Kia is not going to lock up their best player on the perimeter. They had to do it on their own. I was really proud of them. They showed us a lot tonight.