

March 10, 2014



UConn: 72
Louisville: 52

An interview with:

UConn

THE MODERATOR: While we are waiting for Coach, we have Bria Hartley, Breanna Stewart and Stefanie Dolson. We will take questions.

Q. Stef, you talked all year about how you build up to this point to be ready. Do you think this team is playing it's best at this Tournament? Has it reached a point where you're starting to fire on all cylinders?

STEFANIE DOLSON: Yeah, things are definitely clicking, and tonight we went out there and played extremely well as a team. We executed on offense and played great defense and there is always room for improvement because we know the NCAA Tournament is coming up and everybody is going to keep getting better. We can't stay complacent and not get better ourselves. Would he played great tonight and are we're extremely excited that we won, and we've got to keep getting better from here.

Q. Stewie, they cut it to 28-20 about two minutes left in the half or so, three minutes, and then you had that three-point play, the "and one" and you scored 7 points in the final two minutes to send it back to 18. Do you kind of sense there are times to take over and get it back to a comfortable margin instead of letting them get it back to a closer game?

BREANNA STEWART: I think you always want to go into halftime on a good note and then we kind of set up the game. Our transition game kept working and we kept pushing it at them.

THE MODERATOR: Any other questions?

Q. Bria, it seems whenever there is a big game you like to start the game off with a run yourself. Talk about the differences in a game like this and how you go about taking advantage of that.

BRIA HARTLEY: I think when the game starts, you kind of -- I know Coach told us he wanted us to push the ball in transition, and I love to run and in transition; that's what I try to do.

I was trying to get out and the my teammates found me and I was able to knock down a 3-pointer or whatever and I think we had an aggressive mentality in the beginning and we got started and it went through the whole team.

Q. Stewie, we watched you grow up so much last year as a freshman, you went through that rough stretch, you did what you did in the Final Four in the NCAA Tournament. This year you've been consistent all year long. How much better can you become as a player, not just this year but through the next two years?

BREANNA STEWART: There are so many ways I can improve. Being able to do a lot of different things on the court, that means there are so many other things that you can get better at, just not getting complacent and wanting to be the best player I can be.

Q. Bria, over here. What are the signals you look for that tell you that the team is performing at its optimum? What do you like for? What clues you into that?

BRIA HARTLEY: I think it's a feel, especially when we start the game the way we started the last two. Everything is clicking, we're making the right pass at the right time and everyone is sharing the ball and we have so many threats on our team, and we are playing our best basketball when everybody is contributing and putting everything in for the team and you saw how it is these last two games, when we were playing well.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach? You ladies can go.

Q. Coach, can you give us a comment on the middle of the second half and what was going on? Both teams looked like they were somewhat ineffective offensively.

COACH AURIEMMA: You know, I can't speak for them. Looked like they were trying -- probably trying too hard to get back in the game and they were playing way faster than they needed to be playing. I think we lost some concentration there for a little bit. You know, you start missing free-throws, you start -- just all of the sudden playing like every other team plays, you know, for long stretches.

It's something we talked about coming into the game. I don't ever want them to feel, we're up 18 at halftime so let's coast home for the next 20 minutes. I thought we regained it pretty quickly. I was happy to see that.

Q. Could you talk about the experience that you had here at the Sun, and if it were up to you, would you want this to come back?

COACH AURIEMMA: I had a huge win last night. I played blackjack for two hours, and I left with the exact amount of money that I started with, so I am way ahead! I can't wait to come back! It's something that we wanted to do for a long time. We've always talked about it as coaches. I always thought it would be a great experience for the fans, a great experience for the players. It's a beautiful venue, the crowds are great, the people that run it understand how to run these events.

It was it everything that I thought it would be. I hope it was everything that all the other teams and everybody expected it to be. But I'm not surprised it was as good as it was, and I can't think of any one thing that I would say I was disappointed in.

Q. Geno, what are the keys that you look for that tell your experienced eye that your team is playing at its capacity, at its optimum?

COACH AURIEMMA: Mostly for me it's the combinations that we're scoring in, kind of like a boxing match, you know, when if you just throw the same punch over and over and over again, I don't know how effective that is.

So if we're taking the same shots over and over and over again, then I know we're just settling for whatever, the easy way out. But when we are

getting out and getting layups in transition, we're getting to the free-throw line, we're getting enough three's, we're getting the kind of movement that's crisp and clean and everybody is touching the ball, that's an indication to me that everybody is kind of dialed in.

The stretches where I'm not sure we're like that is when it gets very much like one pass, all right, let's hurry up and score, throw another pass and shoot it, whatever shot that is, I don't care, just shoot it. And then we get complacent, but the first half yesterday and the first half today, I don't know that we could play much better than that.

Q. Coach, every coach says they want their team to get off to a fast start, your team continually actual does it, every game. They seem to get into it and open up the early lead. What is it that's different about the kids that you have versus other teams that they continually get that fast start that they're looking for?

COACH AURIEMMA: You know, we do some things at practice that right at the beginning of practice that if they're not into it right away, and there is a couple of things that they've got to get done immediately, then they have to keep doing it until they get it. So we kinda start every day with, all right, these first, 15, 20 minutes better be absolutely perfect so we can move on to the next thing, and I think that carries over into the games. The first five, six, seven minutes of a game, we feel like those seven minutes we're going to be absolutely perfect in what we're doing.

I have tried that other times and my players weren't that good, and it didn't work out so well. It's nice when everybody you pass the ball to has the ability to put points on the board. That's -- you know, our offense -- the skill level of our offensive players is pretty high, even playing top-10 teams in the country, it's pretty high. I hope my teams look the same year after year after year because we spend a lot of time, number one, trying to recruit those kids and number two, we spend a lot of time in practice on offensive skills and it shows sometimes.

Q. Geno, you have won a lot of conference titles and this is the first conference championship for the American, and no one can take that away. How does that feel?

COACH AURIEMMA: We had a conversation in our locker room with the team and we talked about it's not so much -- it's not so much the trophies and the watches or whatever you get, the hats and shirts, they're meaningless. It's nice but they don't really mean anything. The significance of this is you have a goal when you start October 15th. Our goal is to win the conference championship, and then the process is about that. So when you actually do it reinforces that our process is right. We're doin' it the right way.

New league, new coaches, new venue, you know, all that was kind of exciting for us. That's the way we looked at it. We looked at it as an exciting time. I don't know how many conference championships the American Conference is going to host in their lifetime, but as you said, we won the first one. And yesterday I think was a pretty special day here in the sense that you have a conference where a team that's not in the top-20 like South Florida takes the No. 3 team in the country down to the wire, down to the last possession. Nobody in the country is talking about South Florida, but I wouldn't want to play them in the NCAA Tournament, and if anybody gets in ahead of them there should be an investigation. I don't think there is any team playing better basketball right now than South Florida is.

Q. Geno, I was wondering if you think it would be fair for the No. 1 overall seed to be sent to a bracket where they could be playing a true away game in the regional final?

COACH AURIEMMA: Somebody is going to have to do it, you know? Somebody is going to Notre Dame, somebody is going to Louisville and somebody is going to Stanford and you're going to end up playing the home team in one of those three places. Do I like it? No. We had that situation in 1995 we had a regional at Gampel, and back in the day it was called buying your way into the Final Four. You put in a bid, a lot of people aren't going to bid, so you get it and the regionals are at your place every year.

I don't like it. I'm not in favor of it, and I don't think this is going to happen again, either. It's a one-year deal, I think. Regionals should be played on neutral sites. I understand going to places where the game is popular, but I think the three home teams probably are in position to get a No. 1 seed. Louisville, Notre Dame and Stanford.

So if they are, the absolute best 2, 3 and 4 teams in the country should all be in those three regionals, make them pissy about having a Final Four at home. They did that to us in '95. We had us, Virginia, Louisiana Tech and Alabama. It was actually better than the Final Four we went to.

Q. How do you combat the natural instinct that players develop over time when they can't beat a team that's clearly blocking their path to great things? Your program like it was for Notre Dame for a long time is standing in Louisville's way from doing things that they want to do to, win National Championships and Conference Championships? How does Walz convince them to forget about it and it's possible.

COACH AURIEMMA: Well, nothing lasts forever. My first two or three years I think in our league we couldn't beat Villanova, and I thought we would never beat Villanova. And then Kim made the only three of her career and we won at the buzzer, and they didn't beat us again for the next 15 years. Things don't last forever. The object I think is to put yourself in a position where you can win, and at some point you will.

I don't know that, you know, we're not the only team that's standing in any team's way. I think in order -- you know, in order to win the National Championship you eventually are going to have to beat some really, really good teams. They're going to a different conference now, so everything will be different for them. Notre Dame and Louisville can slug it out over there. Eventually it changes. It's cyclical. I'm not -- I'm not naive enough to think that you could play Louisville twice a year for the next ten years and they would never beat us. They're too good of a team, and he's too good of a coach for that to happen. It just that he's caught us in the National Championship game with some of our best teams ever and he caught us this year, the first three times, maybe with one of the best teams we ever had. At some point it will be different. It will be different. That's the only explanation I have.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

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An interview with:

LOUISVILLE

THE MODERATOR: Joining us from Louisville is Head Coach, Jeff Walz with Shoni Schimmel and Asia Taylor. Coach?

COACH WALZ: First off, I would like to congratulate UConn on tonight's game. It's a game where we did some good things but at the same time we didn't do enough of them. And it's a 20-point game but like I told my kids it's not like it was a gradual 20 points. We let 'em get there too quick.

When we started defending and doing things well, they weren't able to extend, it and I know somebody is going to say well they weren't trying well I have a hard believing they weren't trying. I think I know how he coaches a lot better than that, and he's not going to let his kids not try.

You know, we know that we very well could play them again. And, you know, I believe we can beat 'em. I mean, hell, what do you play the game for?

I had a reporter ask my player last time, do you think you could beat UConn, and they said yes, and then they blasted them for it. What the hell you supposed to say, no? What kind of reporter is going to bait a kid into a question like that and write crap like that?

Yeah, we show up to play the game to win. If nobody thinks they can be beat them, let's save a bunch of money and not have the tournament and give 'em the trophy now. But I believe everybody thought the same thing about Baylor last year. It might not be us that does it, it might not be, but I know how Geno prepares his kids. And he's not in that locker room right now going, "It's going to be a breeze for the next three weeks.

Let's go to the casino and roll some dice for the next three days." That's not how he prepares his kids. I'm excited we're going to get the opportunity to continue to play.

I'm excited that these kids are going to get a chance to keep playing, because I think we can do some great things. But it's going to take forty minutes of very, very good basketball in order for anybody to beat them. That's one thing that I've been preaching to our players about the entire time.

You can't play for 20, you can't play for 30, it takes 40 minutes of basketball.

Q. Coach, you cut it to 8, I think it was 28-20 and then Stewie --

COACH WALZ: We can't handle prosperity, that's our trouble right now. We cut it to 8, we had a defensive assignment breakdown and then we fouled. We fouled the jump shooter several times. You know, things like that, you can't do.

That's what we talk about, where we get things going well, and it's like you just gotta come up with one more stop or make them score a contested shot because when we contested them without fouling them, I thought we did a pretty darn good job. We forced Dolson into 4 for 13 from the field because we contested her shots. That's what you have to do.

Unfortunately when we got it to 8 we gave up a backdoor layup and a foul and it goes to 11 and before you know it, it's 18 at the half. Was there more to that question?

Q. There was, it's a good answer anyway. Stewie had 7 of those points and a 3-point play. How tough is she as a match-up and how good of a player is she as a sophomore?

COACH WALZ: She is great. There is no question about it. When you're 6-4 and can shoot the basketball and handle the three, it's tough to guard. She made a few shots that are big-time

shots. I've got no problem with that. I've told my kids, hey, they're going to make contested shots, that's fine. You can't give them the easy ones. We got beat in transition again and we talked about that and that's something we will breakdown on film and we understand now the urgency was there tonight, but now it's really got to be there from here on out because the next game we lose is our last.

Q. Shoni, Louisville teams before you even got here have had their path blocked by this program National Championship games, Conference Championship games. How does an athlete separate the frustration of what goes on against Connecticut with the confidence that you guys are going to get them someday?

SHONI SCHIMMEL: You just gotta keep continuing to believe in what he's preaching. He knows what he's talking about and for us to believe in that, that's what we have to carry over into the game.

He got us to the Final Four coaching us and us following him and going out and executing the game plan and we gotta continue to keep doing that. Tonight we had times where we didn't necessarily do what we were supposed to and it came back and got us. So for us to just actually believe in what he's saying and put two feet into this whole thing, we just gotta to trust in him.

Q. I have to ask about the NCAA Tournament. What are your thoughts on -- I know the Committee will do what they want to do, but what do you think is -- we know UConn is going to be No. 1. Should they go to Louisville? What do you think about that? Should they go somewhere else?

COACH WALZ: How am I supposed to answer that question without getting reprimanded? I'll lose my per diem money and everything! I will be wearing a tee shirt to coach in next time! It all depends what we view as important. If we're trying to put a true NCAA Tournament together, which I think we're at that point now that we can, then if we're the fourth No. 2 and UConn is the first one, then they should come to our place, and I've got no problem with that. That's part of it.

But I mean, I'm not sure how many families here, or writers in this room have their car gassed up and prepared to drive to Louisville if that's where the game -- if that's where with they're sent. You're going to fly to Louisville or Lincoln. So if you're trying to run a true tournament with the true seeding, that's what you would do if we're not

the fourth No. 2 seed. I still look at it as I think we're the only team that has not lost to anyone who is not below 50 in the RPI who is looking to fight for a No. 1 seed, and I know everybody is going to say, well you haven't played ten top-25 teams in the RPI, that's true, because we can only play who is on our schedule, and we had some good nonconference games and some teams had some injuries after we played 'em; they were healthy when we played 'em, but we can't control that. At the same time we had a lot of opportunities to have teams try and beat us.

'Cuz like I try to tell everybody, you know, we've gotten teams in our league right now. You've got UConn and Louisville. You have eight other teams that hope to have an opportunity to make the NCAA Tournament. I'm not sure how many of those eight believe that they could beat UConn for a top-10 RPI win. But I'm willing to bet all of them are like, we can beat Louisville! So we got everybody's best shot, and we did our job. We went 30-4 and did not stumble along the way. I think that speaks volumes for this group of young ladies.

We had lots of opportunities for teams that aren't ranked in the top 50, the top 30 in the RPI to beat us.

THE MODERATOR: Jeff, I wanted to ask about Bria. She was hobbling and --

COACH WALZ: Her knee is bothering her. I was going to be cautious with that, make sure we get that taken care of and get her healthy for the NCAA Tournament.

Q. Jeff, I want to get your thoughts on how vulnerable the one-two combo is, Stewie and Hartley.

COACH WALZ: They're average. They both suck! Lordy, that's one of those great questions. They're unbelievable. You aren't 34-0 for a reason. They're two of the top-10 players in the country.

You know, I personally think you had three of the top-10 players in the country on the floor today, Shoni being one of them, and Stewie and Hartley, they're great. They're talented players. Next!

THE MODERATOR: Thanks.

COACH WALZ: We got time! He ain't goin' nowhere! He's going to his restaurant make sure they're selling food. We can't even get a free meal out of him!

THE MODERATOR: Did you want to ask a question?

COACH WALZ: Yeah, we got time for two more!

Q. I was going to ask you when you coached USA Basketball if you wanted to beat the communist team! (Chuckles) Do you think next year when you're emersed in the ACC, watching what happens there every day there that your program is going to get better, because of what you are going to have to deal with on a day-to-day basis? Versus the fact that Connecticut and Louisville, the teams in this conference are 0-36 against you this year?

COACH WALZ: I'm not going to say that at all. As players we take pride in what we do every day at practice. Our goal is not to go out and say we're playing this team and that team. We're getting done what we need to get done in practice. I'm pushing them as hard as I can. So you're prepared for games. I don't think that's necessarily going to make us all of the sudden a better basketball team, no.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, Coach.

COACH WALZ: Go ahead, we got one more.

Q. Last year you guys had a great tournament. How likely is it that teams can elevate even in the course of the tournament?

COACH WALZ: We've found a way to do that a lot of times. In '09 I'm not sure we were picked as a favorite to go to the Final Four. I know last year we weren't. We get to the Sweet 16 Shoni's freshman year and Asia's freshman year and if Monique Green doesn't tear her hamstring in the warm-ups, I think there is a great shot we're playing Stanford in the Final Four. We figured out a way to do that. That's what our plans are. You play this regular season and conference tournament for the NCAA Tournament. That's why I tell everybody I would hate to coach a football team in college because if you lose a game in September it screws you for the rest of the year. Here we have a true tournament that you get a chance to play and it's not necessarily the best team that always wins, it's who is playing the best basketball at the time. Notre Dame beat UConn three times last year and they lose in the Final Four.

You gotta figure out a way to get your kids to believe in what you're doing and to play your

best basketball at the right time and anything can happen, and I think we've proven that here.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks.

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