

Setting The Standard

An Interview with Geno Auriemma, Head Coach, Women's Basketball, University of Connecticut

EDITORS' NOTE Entering his 40th season in 2024-25, Geno Auriemma has redefined the meaning of success as head coach of the University of Connecticut women's basketball program. During his illustrious tenure, Auriemma has transformed the Huskies into an unmatched program of excellence. Arriving at Storrs, Connecticut prior to the 1985-86 season, Auriemma has taken a program with just one winning season to its current state, which includes 11 NCAA Championships,



Geno Auriemma

22 Final Fours, six perfect seasons, and 57 conference championships. A 2006 inductee to both the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame and the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame, Auriemma became just the fourth women's basketball coach to reach 1,000 career wins on December 19, 2017. He was the fastest coach to reach the mark, doing so in his 1,135th career game, and owns the best win percentage in the sport (.883). Auriemma has been named Naismith National Coach of the Year eight times, AP National Coach of the Year nine times, WBCA National Coach of the Year seven times, and conference coach of the year 16 times. Off the court, the Huskies boast a perfect 100 percent graduation rate among four-year student-athletes while regularly participating in community service and outreach. As members of the American Athletic Conference from 2013-20, UConn won the league's regular season and tournament titles in each season while not dropping a game in conference play. UConn has swept both conference titles in the same year 22 times under Auriemma and a total of 25 Huskies have been named conference player of the year. Auriemma served as head coach of the U.S. Women's National team for eight years, leading Team USA to the 2012 and 2016 Olympic gold medals. He also led the United States to gold in the 2010 and 2014 FIBA World Championships. Auriemma is a 1981 graduate of West Chester with a BA degree in political science.

Where did your passion for sports develop?

When I came to America at seven years old, sports were a great way to meet kids and, in many ways, I was able to learn the language being on the playground playing games. Sports and teams gave me a sense of belonging, so whether it was in school or outside of school, it was important to me to be a part of a team. Baseball was my first true love and I played baseball every chance I could.

When basketball season came around and I started playing in ninth grade, I fell in love with the practices and the grind of the game. Basketball is a game where all five players need to be engaged at all times, which was different from baseball, and I was drawn to the connection that it takes for the team to work together to be successful. My interest in basketball grew and I wanted to learn more about it each and every day.

What have been the keys to the strength and leadership of the women's basketball program at University of Connecticut?

When I got the job, and Chris Dailey came on board to coach with me, we set a standard for how we were going to do things and what was important to us. We were going to build a culture with a clear set of values. We were going to run it like it was a Catholic high school basketball program where everyone is held accountable every day and you have certain obligations, whether that be to your schoolwork or to your basketball team. We had to go out and find the types of kids that would fit into this culture, and at the beginning they

may not have necessarily been the best players, but they had a commitment to playing smart and playing hard and competing as a teammate.

We have not wavered in 40 years in regard to the types of kids we want to bring into the program – we look at their values and how they mesh with our values. We have never taken a kid who did not have those values just because they were a really talented player and may be able to help us win games. That doesn't mean we have not come up short at times where we thought a player may fit and it didn't work out, but for the most part we have been very effective at finding the same sort of kids that have the values and commitment we look for, and who have high expectations for themselves since we are going to put high expectations on them.

How do you go about finding those types of players, and is it harder to know what you are getting today?

It is much harder today. It reminds me of what Chris Rock said, "When you meet somebody for the first time, you're not meeting them. You're meeting their representative." The best way to learn about a person is to watch them on the court and see them play – when they are on the court, they can't hide



Head Coach Geno Auriemma and Associate Head Coach Chris Dailey (far right) celebrate UConn's victory over the University of Southern California at the 2024 NCAA D1 Women's Basketball Tournament

or pretend to be someone else. You can tell a lot about an individual by how they carry themselves on the court, how they act on the bench, and how they interact with the coaching staff, teammates, and officials.

One reason it is hard to get to know a kid off the court is that you can't have a conversation with them when their parents are around since their parents want to answer every question for them. We try to get them one-on-one. At the end of the day, you go on instinct and we are pretty good at knowing when a kid is being honest with us.

What are your views on the transfer portal?

The idea that you can transfer is fine, but now you are going to tell me that you can transfer four times and you can leave whenever you feel like it. I think this has opened up a situation where every kid, every day, every year is a free agent. This leads to people tampering with your players and there is no longer a contract. The fact that kids can move from place to place and do it over and over again is the worst thing that has happened to college basketball. I don't mind if you want to transfer – if you don't like it and are not happy, then you should go. But transferring three or four times – it can't always be the school.

What are your feelings about NIL?

I am fine with NIL, except there are no rules. The reality is that public opinion drives society, and sports is no different, but whoever said that the public has common sense. I am fine with the way NIL was intended to be – if you sell jerseys with my name on them, I should get compensated; if you want to run your own basketball camp, you should be able to do it; if you are using me to promote the program or sell more tickets for the school, I should be compensated; if you want to work out a deal with a clothing company or a car company, you should be able to do it. The problem is that the people who came up with NIL and are making the rules are not as smart as the coaches. The reality is that as soon as they tell you what the rule is, the coaches have already figured out how to break it. They said that you can't use NIL for recruiting. They must be out of their minds if they think schools can't find a way to pay a kid, or to get someone to pay them. This was being done when it was illegal, and now you are saying it is legal, but that you still can't do it.

I am in favor of NIL, but not the way it is set up now. Smaller schools are going to get bankrupted out of existence since they will not be able to compete at the highest levels. We need to get a commissioner who says that we are going to get a salary cap and end free agency, and that we are going to treat the players as professionals since, if we are paying them to come to school, then we might as well have them sign contracts like the pros do.

Are you surprised to see the spotlight on women's college basketball today and has the quality of the game changed?

I may be in the minority, but I would ask how the quality of the game has changed. The quality of the game has not changed. There is still no point guard out there like Sue Bird. There are very good big players out there today like Breanna Stewart and A'ja Wilson, but wasn't Lisa Leslie just like that;



Point guard Nika Mubl and Coach Auriemma during a 2023 game at XL Center

wasn't Cheryl Miller just like that. Who is the new Diana Taurasi? People may say Caitlin Clark or Angel Reese, but are they? What makes them that right now, other than that somebody said they are? Is the game that much better, or are people being told that the game is that much better?

The media has decided that this is a story worth following because there are some compelling people out there, and social media has said they are important. I am all in favor of that, but the idea that the game is so much better than it was 5-10 years ago is just not true.

How important has it been for you as a coach to keep the relationship with your players after they are done playing for you?

When you think about it, you ask yourself who you are trying to affect. I am working with a 17-year-old who basically just put their life in my hands and said, "Coach, help me go from here to there." This is during the most formative years of their lives. As a coach, you spend the next four years doing your best to make an impression. You are working with these kids at a time when what you do stays with them, either good or bad. I think the way we treat our



Coach Auriemma celebrates with UConn's cheerleaders following their victory over the University of Southern California at the 2024 NCAA D1 Women's Basketball Tournament

kids while they are here, and the things we try to instill in them, makes them feel that the coaching staff at UConn has really prepared them for when they leave the school to begin whatever is next.

Another part is that they really get to know me and our coaching staff, whether that is Chris (Dailey, Associate Head Coach), Jamelle Elliott (Assistant Coach), or any other member of our staff. This takes the relationship to another level. So, while they know we coached them, they also feel that they know us and are friends with us. They can call us and ask for anything, and they know we will do it for them. The relationship evolves from being a teacher and a mentor, to becoming a friend. It is very much like raising a family.

How critical has it been to build such a strong and talented coaching staff?

I knew when I first took the job that this was going to be critical, and that my first hire was going to set the tone. That first person on my staff was going to be hands-on with everything and would be the first one to talk to a kid or meet a parent. I got it right when I was able to get Chris to join me, and since then we have been very fortunate that when someone gets a job here, they rarely leave. This indicates to me that we are not only creating an environment where players want to come to play, but also where coaches want to come to coach. Our coaches know that they do not work for me, but rather that they are my partners.

How do you evaluate the success of a season when the expectation is to always win a national championship?

You start to think that this is what we do at Connecticut – you come here and you win national championships. It almost became expected, but since 2016 we have been without a national championship which I think has made people realize that what we had accomplished was pretty amazing. The reality is that it is hard as hell to win a national championship, and it is only after you look back and reflect that you realize how special it is. If I would have known how hard it was, I would have had more fun and appreciated it more at the time.

What do you think your former players would say when asked what it was like to play for Coach Auriemma?

This did come up at practice one time when we were discussing some of the things you hear from the outside, and I asked one of my players if she felt I was tough to play for. She said yes, and when I asked why, she told me that I was very demanding. I asked her if that was hard on her, to which she said yes. When I then asked her if she would want me to be different, she said no and that she wanted me to be exactly how I was. I guess what I took from that is that while I am very demanding – of myself, my staff, my players – it is about demanding that they be their best and not to cut any corners. I am demanding that they put their heart and soul into whatever they are doing.

I am not demanding that I get what I want from you; I am demanding that you get what you need to get from you in order for you to get the things you want.

Do you ever think about slowing down?

I think about it a lot. I spent the past weekend playing some great golf courses and thought to myself, why the hell am I going back up to school on Monday to run practice. Guys my age don't do that. Then, when I was at practice, I was complaining about every pass and every cut and every shot – like it was my first time ever at a practice. As long as I still get that feeling and have the patience to teach, and as long as I think the players still respond and want it, then I am going to keep doing it.

Going back to what we talked about earlier, with the rules that are being set, it is making it harder to enjoy it. The only time I really enjoy it is when I am on the floor with my players.

Are you able to take moments to reflect and appreciate what you have accomplished?

It is like when you are playing golf. You hit two or three great shots, make a putt, and get a birdie on a tough hole. People get excited for you, but that is the reason you play golf – to have moments like that when you hit the putt. The same thing goes for basketball. I have a character flaw in that if we go undefeated and win a national championship, the first thing I am thinking about is how we could have been so much better if I would have done certain things differently. I do think I need to step back and appreciate it more, and sometimes when I am walking through our building and there is no one else there, I walk on the court, look at the banners, and think, holy crap, we did it, and it will never ever be done like this again. Those moments make me feel pretty damn good. ●