Daily **Sports**

Women's Basketball:

Strong returns with Marjanović in attendance,

No. 1 UConn cruises past Creighton 94-44

by Jake McCreven
STAFF WRITER
HE/HIM/HIS
jpm23012@uconn.edu



UConn women's basketball team playing a home game against the Creighton Blue Jays at Gampel Pavilion. The Huskys dominated the game, winning 94-44. PHOTOS BY CONNOR SHARP, PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

The top-ranked UConn women's basketball team's 32-point win over Butler last Saturday felt... gaudy – as though the Huskies were ready to go but never quite ready to get going.

Geno Auriemma, forced to watch an offense marred by turnovers and inconsistency, palmed his temples in between gazes down the bench at Sarah Strong, who missed the first game of her career due to tightness. Life without the superstar forward was destabilizing and frustrating.

"When she's not on the floor, there's a lot missing," Auriemma said. "Sometimes you put a player on the floor, and 'this' [one thing] is what they do. When you take somebody like Sarah off the floor, now you're missing a great shooter, a great post player, a terrific passer, another ball handler, maybe our best defender. So, one person out of the lineup is like losing three or four people out of the lineup."

Good thing he didn't have to live that excruciating reality again.

Strong, a late midseason and top 20 watch list candidate for the Wooden Award, returned Wednesday and starred in the Huskies' (26-0, 15-0) 94-44 squishing of Creighton (12-13, 8-8), posting 16 points, 3 rebounds, 3 assists and a plus-26 +/- in 19 minutes.

"There definitely is a different feel with her on the court versus off the court," Azzi Fudd said. "We've been really fortunate to not have to experience off the court too much. When she's on the court, it's like a sense of peace harmony, like all things are right in the world."

She made up for lost time early, chipping in eight of the UConn's first 10 points, including a pair of contested 3-pointers, while also adding a forced turnover, block and an interception before the first quarter media timeout.

"Yeah," Auriemma admitted with a toothy grin, "I always miss her. So do the other players."

Strong had scored 12 of Connecticut's first 14 points by the time Auriemma pulled her in favor of Allie Ziebell, offset only by a Fudd elbow jumper on the second possession of the game.

Ziebell sank her first triple of the night only a minute after she was subbed in, breaking a 14-14 tie built on four Creighton 3-pointers.

It was the first make of her 20-point, five 3-pointer day on the wing. Ziebell poured on 17 second half points, highlighted by a 4-of-7 mark from 3, to finish as the team's leading scorer for the second time in four games.

"When somebody's not available to you," Auriemma said referring to Blanca Quiñonez's shoulder injury, "that's really an opportunity for other people to say 'this is my shot'... [Ziebell] was a point guard in high school; she knows where the ball is supposed to go. She can shoot it like nobody else."

The young and relatively inexperienced Bluejays punched above their weight class for most of the first half, staying within single digits of the Huskies until the second quarter media timeout, when Fudd picked off a wayward pass and ran to the rim for an uncontested lay-in.

Creighton hit on four early 3-pointers and held the Huskies to a 4-of-11 start to begin the game, limiting UConn's second chance opportunities with a hardy effort on the defensive glass.

But it didn't last – Kayleigh Heckel made sure of it.

Heckel checked in at the 5:14 mark of the first quarter and swiped two steals on her first three defensive possessions, stymieing the Bluejays' transition offense that had kept them afloat.

"Everybody talks about how many points they scored," Auriemma said of Heckel, Ziebell and Ashlynn Shade. "But for us, I want to evaluate these guys on what kind of impact they had on the game. Do they impact the game? Do we notice them defensively? Do we notice them making a play that doesn't show up on the stat sheet. I thought Allie, Heckel and Ash were exactly what we need them to be."

After four minutes on the bench, Heckel checked back in with three minutes remaining in the first half and sliced the Bluejay defense in half with a pair of powerful straight line drives. The sophomore scored seven points in two minutes, including a momentum-seizing and-1 that pushed the lead to 20.

Heckel was one of five Huskies to finish in double figures, scoring 13 points on an efficient 6-of-10 shooting.

Connecticut flexed its lead from the 3-point line in the third quarter, thanks in part to a combined 15 points off five triples from Fudd, Ziebell and Shade. Fudd rattled off six points in 15 seconds to force a Creighton timeout early in the third quarter, which buried the 'Jays in a hole they wouldn't escape from.

Fudd finished with 19 points on 8-of-13 shooting, adding a trey of 3-pointers, four rebounds and four assists in 28 minutes.

"There are things we can get better at and there are some things that we're going to have to deal with," Auriemma said. "Play through it. Mask it a little bit. It's a constant process – trying to get better."

