

THE MISSING PAIGE:

What about Bueckers’ absence warranted Auriemma’s comments on Sunday?

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Less than 20 minutes after UConn smushed St. John’s to finish the regular season as the country’s lone undefeated team Sunday, Geno Auriemma shook his head incredulously when asked his thoughts on the narrative that this year’s team is better than last’s.

“I don’t like that narrative,” Auriemma admitted. “I don’t know that you take one of the top five players in the WNBA off your team and say you’re better. I don’t know how I can justify saying that.”

Auriemma’s rare unrestrained praise of Paige Bueckers, last year’s team leader, prompted a follow-up from the venerable head coach.

“There are a lot of times when I watch us play and I say, ‘that wouldn’t have happened if we had Paige,’” he added. “There are things that happen that maybe are not obvious or ascertained by other people, but we know, on the coaching staff, we know.”

Auriemma’s cryptic acknowledgment that this season’s 31-win wagon, buoyed by the All-American efforts of Azzi Fudd and Sarah Strong, isn’t as deadly as the one that limped out of South Bend and Knoxville with losses last year is, for the 41-year veteran, less of a complaint and more of an honest reckoning.

“Now, that doesn’t mean they’re not capable of playing at a real high level that matches what that team did last year – maybe that’s in the cards for them, I don’t know – but we’re a much different team than we were last year,” he concluded.

“But right now, to say that we’re a better team than we were last year, I don’t buy that.”

It’s hard to find any glaring discrepancies between the two teams... superficially, at least.

Both rank first nationally in defensive rating (points allowed per 100 possessions) and weathered a top 35 strength of schedule laden with top 10 foes in non-conference play. Both teams rank first in the country in field goal percentage and are top 2 in true shooting percentage, respectively. Both teams rank first in NET Rating on CBB Analytics and, through the end of the regular season, top Bart Torvik’s T-Rank system.

In fact, the 2025-26 squad averaged more points (88.5 to 81.7) and allowed fewer per game (68.5 to 75.2) in regular season play. It’s hardy and – for now – healthy nine-man rotation has given it a defensive backbone that helped force 212 more turnovers (774) than field goals allowed (562), according to Puneet Nanda on X.

“We have a few more players [than last year] that we can trust and put on the court,” Auriemma said. “That’s why I said I think we’re different. We have a different way of playing; we have different options.”

Peel back the analytical veneer, however, and the deeper-seated problems Auriemma alluded to on the podium Sunday rear their ugly head.

“None of those guys that I bring off the bench are Paige,” Auriemma said bluntly.

That they aren’t, and it’s unfair to expect them to match the sheer production of Bueckers’ 40-point explosion when the team was reeling against Oklahoma in the Sweet 16 last March.

Remember, last season’s team enjoyed the luxury of deploying Bueckers, Fudd and Strong – what could end up being one of the best trios in the history of the sport – on the court at the same time, all of whom acted not only as offensive batteries but as team leaders and late-game maestros.

So yes, while Fudd – who’s progressed to become a top-shelf defender on top of her unrivaled 3-point prowess – and Strong – a candidate for National Player of the Year – both return to spearhead the Huskies’ NCAA Tournament run, Connecticut will inevitably lack Bueckers’ “it” factor Auriemma described in earnest last season.

And even if (or perhaps when) Fudd and Strong compensate for Bueckers’ absence in the NCAA Tournament from a scoring perspective, having three All-American caliber players is always better than having two.

But, as Auriemma said, these Huskies are different, which allows them to go a full rotation deep into the bench, play at a faster tempo offensively and lean on their hyper-aggressive defensive mindset to build insurmountable leads before the end of the first quarter.

It’s worked so far, as evidenced by an opening night win over now-top 10 Louisville, a 32-point blitzing of Ohio State, a 26-point shelling of Iowa in Brooklyn and a 30-point detonation of Tennessee. If these Huskies are capable of running the table, however, something Auriemma alluded was a possibility Sunday, they’ll have to do it without the player that defined last season’s run.



Paige Bueckers cheers for teammates along with Azzi Fudd during a game at UConn. Bueckers is considered an all-time player for this program, making it difficult to replace her presence on the court. PHOTO COURTESY OF @05UCONN10 ON PINTEREST

Droppin’ Dimes



LOGO BY LILLIAN LAEMINA STAFF ARTIST/ THE DAILY CAMPUS

DROPPIN’ DIMES:

RANKING ALEX KARABAN’S FIVE BEST HOME GAMES AT UCONN

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Alex Karaban committed to continue his basketball career in Connecticut. on Aug. 2, 2021. Four and a half years later, Karaban played his last game in the Basketball Capital of the World.

The two-time national champion played in 66 home games for the Huskies. He put together a 90.9 winning percentage between Gampel Pavilion and PeoplesBank Arena. In honor of his final home game, let’s rank the five best home performances of Alex Karaban’s career.

HM. BYU - Nov. 15, 2026

Alright, I know this wasn’t actually a home game. But it did take place at TD Garden, less than 30 miles from Karaban’s home in Southborough, M.A. The arena has also been referred to in the past as Storrs North, so I’m giving it an honorable mention.

Karaban finished the game with 21 points in a four-way tie for the team’s leading scorer in a high-octane 86-84 finish. He knocked down three consecutive three-pointers as BYU clawed back into the game in the second half, finishing a perfect 4-of-4 on the night.

It was UConn’s first win over a ranked opponent this season.

5. Villanova - Dec. 28, 2022

Karaban gave UConn fans a glimpse of things to come during his redshirt freshman season. The Huskies had coasted to a 13-0 record, entering the game as the No. 10 team in the country. Villanova offered the Huskies their first real test.

While it was Jordan Hawkins who led the Huskies in scoring with 22, Karaban posted 15 points in the winning effort. He knocked down three critical three-pointers to suppress the Wildcats’ chances of taking the lead. The game was emblematic of what would be Karaban’s career to come: he didn’t need to dominate the ball to leave an impact on the game. He provided stability and was the connector in Dan Hurley’s offense.

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4. Xavier - Dec. 18, 2024

The 2024-25 season was a roller coaster ride for Karaban and the Huskies; between injuries, uncharacteristic losses and shooting slumps. But the team’s overtime win over Xavier in Hartford was certainly a high.

Karaban was the hero for UConn overtime. He scored seven of UConn’s 14 overtime points to put the game away in a 94-89 final. He scored 20 points in total and made several key stops on the defensive end which included three blocks. Xavier head coach Sean Miller credited Karaban for his clutch performance during the post-game press conference.

“I don’t know if college basketball has ever had a better winner,” Miller said.

3. Georgetown - Jan. 14, 2024

Karaban put on a dominant scoring clinic 80-67 win at the then-XL Center. The Huskies were without their starting center, Donovan Clingan, which forced the Huskies to resort to a “small ball” lineup.

He shot out of a cannon in the first half, burying five three pointers before the intermission. He knocked down another in the second half, finishing with a career high six made threes. The performance also marked his career-high in points with 26. He was 9-of-13 from the field and 6-of-8 from three.

The win powered UConn to the No. 1 sport in the AP Poll.

2. Marquette - Mar. 5, 2025

UConn was in desperate need of a victory over No. 20 Marquette as March began last season. The Huskies were ranked outside of the top 25 as they jockeyed for position in the Big East standings. They were looking to



Alex Karaban of the UConn Huskies high fives teammates during the starting lineup announcement. Karaban is finishing up his final season in Storrs, looking to dominate conference play in the upcoming weeks. PHOTO COURTESY OF @ALEXKARABAN_ ON INSTAGRAM

complete a season sweep over a team that had been ranked in the top 25 all year.

Karaban stepped up and scored 16 second half points, which included a personal 7-0 run. He received a pass on the wing with just 23 seconds remaining and UConn clinging to a one-point lead. He stepped into a deep three pointer, icing the dagger and securing the 72-66 victory in a raucous Gampel Pavilion.

He finished the game with 21 points.

1. Seton Hall, - Feb. 27, 2026

Karaban saved his best for last. He scored a season-high 23 points in his senior day game against Seton Hall at Gampel Pavilion. Karaban became the first active player in program history to be named into the Huskies of Honor.

UConn trailed eight late in the second half. Karaban hit

back-to-back threes amid a 10-0 kill shot for the Huskies. He was nearly perfect from deep, knocking down 5-of-6 attempts from beyond the arc. Karaban played all 40 minutes and sank the two free throws that secured his 60th career victory at home.

The win was one final reminder of why he is the winningest player in program history. He led one final Husky Chant before stepping off his home court one last time.