Daily

SPORTS

Women's Basketball:

NO. 2 UCONN OPENS SEASON, SHELLACKS CORNELL FOR 31ST CONSECUTIVE SEASON OPENER WIN



UConn women's basketball forward Sarah Strong faces off against Cornell University on Nov. 2 at PeoplesBank Arena. Strong scored 19 points for the Huskies.
PHOTO BY NORA MARIANO, ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR/ THE DAILY CAMPUS

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HARTFORD – After No. 2 UConn's three-game exhibition series, Head Coach Geno Auriemma saw a lot of things from his team. Some of those things he liked, others he didn't.

"We didn't make any threes against Syracuse, our defense was really good against Texas," Auriemma said last Saturday. "[And] for the most part, our defense was not great the first part of the Army game."

Auriemma emphasized that during the program's first regular-season game against Cornell, he wanted to see his program combine these qualities.

With a 100-35 win over the Cornell Big Red, Auriemma and Husky fans had an opportunity to see these combinations, marking the Huskies' 31st consecutive season opener win.

"You hope that, you know, everybody performs pretty well and comes out of there feeling like you know 'We've got some work to do,'" Auriemma said on his roster's season opener. "At the same time, we did a bunch of good things, and I thought we competed really hard and played with a lot of energy."

Over the first half, despite going only 2-9 from beyond the arc, the Huskies' peppery defense and ball movement in the paint aided the Huskies to build such a hefty lead.

Freshman Jovana Popovic and junior Sarah Strong were the two offensive anchors for the Huskies. Popovic locked the Huskies' offense in, while Strong set her teammates up.

In her first regular-season game as a Husky, Popovic cashed in 19 points and three rebounds, going 8-12 from the field.

Strong reached a new career-high with eight steals, showcasing her niftiness and consistent pressure on the defensive end. Strong was the catalyst for UConn in stealing the ball from Cornell, then dishing it off to her teammates to finish it off in the paint.

With the opening of the season, it also brought Blanca Quiñonez's sophomore year debut, after missing the Huskies' three exhibition games due to a shoulder injury.

Coming into this matchup, it brought up the question of whether Quiñonez would step in for freshman Jovana Popovic, who got the nod from Auriemma in the preseason.

Quiñonez ended up coming off the bench in the matchup, picking up right where she left off. The lineup combination, including Popovic, Strong and Quiñonez on the floor proved to be a lethal matchup against Cornell.

"She just gives us a different look out there. She gives us a different dimension," Auriemma said when asked about Quiñonez. "When she and Sarah are on the floor together, there's a lot of chemistry between the two of them. She's not crazy about how she played today [...] but she puts a lot of time into it."

With 28 points in the paint over the course of the first and second frames, it was utter annihilation from the Huskies in the first half, forcing Cornell to go 5-26 from the field for the entirety of the first half.

Throughout the first two frames, Connecticut forced Cornell to only go 3-14 from the field and 2-12 from beyond the arc. UConn capitalized on Cornell's 18 turnovers, scoring 28 points off them.

At the end of the second quarter, the Huskies led 46-13.

Fans had the chance to see freshman Marine Dursus step onto the court for the first time as a Husky in the second half of the matchup. After being sidelined due to a foot injury for the first three exhibition games, fans got to see Dursus' skills on full display.

As the Big Red worked their way to combat the Huskies' defense, Dursus added to the Huskies lead, going 100% with her attempts from the field and beyond the arc in the final frame.

Over the duration of the fourth quarter, Dursus piled up 11 points and two steals in just 10 minutes on the court.

"I think it feels great, like I was kind of waiting for this moment," Dursus said postgame when asked about her first game. "It's been like two months, even more. I just wanted to play, so now I could see what [it's like] to play in this arena with the fans and everything. It's really great."

With Dursus at the forefront, the Huskies closed out the game on a 17-0 run over the final four minutes of the matchup.

Now, with their first win under their belt, the Huskies will look to shift their focus to Thursday's matchup against Syla Swords and No. 5 Michigan.

"They have a style of play that I think is fun to watch," Auriemma said when asked about the Michigan matchup. "They're well coached and I'm sure they're incredibly good at home because that's what all good teams are."

Tip-off between these two foes is scheduled for 6:30 from the Crisler Center in Ann Arbor, Mich. Husky fans can tune in to the bout on FS1.

Women's Basketball:

UCONN TESTED — AND FLEXED — ITS DEPTH AGAINST CORNELL IN OPENING-NIGHT MASSACRE

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HARTFORD — Blanca Quiñonez checked in to a standing ovation from the PeoplesBank Arena crowd at the 6:33 mark of the first quarter during UConn women's basketball's 100-35 stomping of Cornell University Monday.

Quiñonez, who replaced Jana El Alfy as UConn's second post player, immediately joined UConn's full-court press and stonewalled the Big Red's ball handler at mid-court, forcing a Cornell turnover — the fourth of 29 Big Red giveaways.

Seconds later, Kayleigh Heckel spelled Ashlynn Shade — joining both KK Arnold and Jovana Popovic on the floor — and instantly drew an offensive foul that left the Huskies' bench unglued.

Allie Ziebell got in on the blitz when she checked in just before the first quarter ended and beat the buzzer on a driving layup.

In total, 12 of the 13 Huskies played (Morgan Cheli was kept out with an undisclosed injury) and all but one, Gandy Malou-Mamel, scored.

"It's a crazy thing," said Auriemma, who noted Saturday how difficult it can be to find the best possible lineup early in the season. "You might think, 'Wow, this group would look really, really great together,' and that's not always the case. Tonight, we wanted to try and see a number of combinations, see what they'd look like."

UConn will need to find that lineup during its next four games, which include three away tilts at No. 5 Michigan, No. 18 Ohio St. and No. 7 Louisville sandwiched in between the Gampel Pavilion opener against No. 10 Iowa on Nov. 8.

"Thursday (against Michigan) may give us some idea of how the process will go," Auriemma said. "But Thursday won't look anything like tonight, I would assume."

Monday's opener was never close — UConn added 28 points in the paint and 27 off turnovers before Cornell scored 10 total — but it wasn't designed to be anything more than a tune up, a rare "buy game" hidden amongst UConn's gauntlet of a non-conference schedule, Auriemma used to test out different lineups.

Aside from the starting lineup, which played together until Quiñonez checked in 3:27 into the game, no five-player configuration was together for more than two consecutive dead balls.

There were moments when Quiñonez, freshman Olivia Vukosa and Sarah Strong shared the floor; other lineups featured Arnold, Popovic, Heckel and Shade together.

Strong (19 points in 21 minutes) and Popovic (19 points, 23 minutes) led the team in scoring and minutes, but seven other Huskies hit on multiple field goals while nine others recorded 10-plus minutes.

UConn's efficiencies seldom dropped regardless of what combination of players was on the court: UConn averaged 1.32 points per possession and forced 29 turnovers, which it cashed in for 43 points, while pouring on 52 points in the paint and 37 off the bench.

But not all 13 players will factor into UConn's usually tight-knit rotation; there are only 40 minutes to distribute every night, after all.

"Whoever it ends up being that isn't going to get as many minutes, they have to be realistic and say, 'Why aren't I, and what am I willing to do to put myself in that situation?'" Auriemma said. "'What's more important to (me)? Yes, I want to play, but yes, I want us to win. The more we win, the more chances I'm going to get to play.'"

Auriemma didn't enter Monday believing he'd find his best possible combination of five players on the roster — again, that's not what a 65-point steamrolling of Cornell is designed to do — but to have all 12 healthy players make meaningful contributions in a regular season game is a testament to the depth the Huskies have cultivated all off season.

"Contrary to what players think," Auriemma quipped, "Coaches don't wake up in the morning and go, 'I'm going to play these eight players. Or these nine players. Or these 10 players.' Because there comes a point where they have to understand, the players, that they are the ones deciding whether they play or not."



UConn women's basketball player Blanca Quiñonez. The Huskies faced Cornell University on Nov. 2 at PeoplesBank Arena.
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