Sports

Photo of the Day | Uconn's mascot Jonathan



UConn's mascot Jonathan sports a pink jersey at the volleyball game against St. John's on Friday at the UConn Volleyball Center in Storrs. The jersey was worn in support of October's Breast Cancer Awareness month. PHOTO BY PARKER MEYERS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

HOW NYKESHA SALES' 'CHEAT SHEET' IS HELPING SARAH STRONG BECOME A LEADER FOR UCONN WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

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UConn Women's Basketball player Sarah Strong smiles during the Big East Media Day on Oct. 1, 2026 at the Marriott Marquis in Times Square. Media outlets had the opportunity to speak with players about the upcoming season. PHOTO BY MADISON HENDRICKS, ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

STORRS — Sarah Strong stood alone on the far end of the baseline of the Werth Champions Center court Saturday after missing a pair of contested-but-makeable 3-point shots during the five-on-five scrimmage portion of UConn's practice.

Strong's hands were locked on her hips as she rhythmically swayed back and forth, separate from the rest of her teammates who congregated under the basket to cheer on those on the court.

Then, from the opposite end of the baseline, assistant coach Nykesha Sales began fervently clapping, imploring Olivia Vukosa to box out on the glass after the freshman center gave up an easy rebound on the previous possession.

That caught Strong's attention. Less than 10 seconds later, Strong was high-fiving Ashlynn Shade after her corner 3 swished and pointing toward freshman Jovana Popovic, who threw the cross-court pass to Shade.

Sales, a 1998 UConn graduate, was hired away from Georgia this off season after Jamelle Elliott retired in June. She has worked extensively with the players since her arrival on campus, learning their idiosyncrasies and understanding them as people to help them grow.

She's learned, as many others have, that Strong, along with being one of the most dominant players in the country, is also one of the most reticent. Pushing Strong out of that shell and into a leadership role was paramount for Sales, who sees herself in the All-American junior.

"It's the same storyline," Sales said. "She came in, she won a national championship; I came in, won the championship. Then the big dogs leave, so now you have to not only still produce what you did as a freshman and as a sophomore, but now you have to be way more vocal. I wasn't very vocal, I liked to show by example. Now she has to be the true leader."

Sales was a stalwart on Connecticut's first national championship team in 1995, much like Strong was 30 years later in 2025, and finished her tenure in Storrs as the program's all-time leading scorer at the time. Her own journey from a soft-spoken freshman to a boisterous senior leader is what's inspired her to help Strong.

"A lot (of people) compare me to Sarah Strong," Sales said. "Being able to play inside, outside a little bit, body type. Obviously, she's one of the best players in the country — I don't know if I was when I was here like that — and she has a lot of responsibility and a lot of growth."

While there are always aspects of the game to improve on the court, most of the reigning National Player of the Year's growth will happen this season off the court — primarily with Sales, who loves to talk intangibles.

"I'm a cheat sheet," Sales said of how she's helped the players. "I played here. I know (the coaches) well. I was a pro — I know a lot of them want to be pros — so I'm a cheat sheet. I can help them before they self-destruct and give them hints of what may happen if you don't do stuff right or play hard."

Sales also recognized Strong's growth this summer, citing her ability to take command of on-court huddles and be the unifying voice on a team searching for a leader.

"She's a quiet person, I noticed," Sales said. "She likes to play, but now she's already being a lot more vocal, which will help out a lot with her career moving forward."

Helping Strong find her voice — which she displayed last season during the NCAA Tournament, particularly in the Huskies' final three games — will, in Sales' eyes, make her one of the most complete players in basketball.

"She's super-duper talented," Sales said. "Some of the stuff she does, me and coach look at each other and start smiling and giggling because she's a three-tier player with the 3-point line, mid-range, making decisions and working hard in practice."

While still at Georgia, Sales tipped off Elliott, who was representing UConn, to Strong during the 2024 recruiting cycle. It was the first time any member of the UConn staff had watched Strong play, and it wasn't much longer before the nation's top-ranked recruit committed to Connecticut.

"I was watching her, and it wasn't a player I was supposed to be watching — I can say that now because I'm not there — but I snuck over to the other court because I knew there was going to be some good basketball," Sales said. "Then Jamelle saw me over there (and came to) say, 'Hi,' and I was like, 'Yo, you need to watch this kid — she's really good.' Then I had to tiptoe off and she stayed, and then a year later she's here."

Molding Strong into a vocal leader will take a delicate touch, with more poise and patience than was standard 30 years ago. Sales recognizes that.

"You've got the same concepts, philosophy and the same culture," Sales said. "It's just a different type of player now. This generation is a little different. It's the teaching aspect."

Even if Strong's voice isn't booming over the roar of sold-out arenas just yet, her on-court presence still shows what a leader looks like.

"When she's on the floor," Sales said, "everything changes. The dynamic of the offense and the defense changes. It's a noticeable difference when she's out there.