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WOMEN'S BASKETBALL:

Disjointed UConn blasts Syracuse 88-60 in preseason opener

by Jake McCreven
ASSOCIATE SPORTS EDITOR
HE/HIM/HIS
jpm23012@uconn.edu

UNCASVILLE — Geno Auriemma gruffed as he left Saturday's media availability that he'd spent the past two weeks installing offense to beat man coverage just to indulge in a "glorified practice" against a Syracuse team that runs strictly zone.

That's not to say the UConn women's basketball team wasn't prepared for its preseason tilt with former nemesis Syracuse at Mohegan Sun Arena — the Huskies, like normal, bussed down to Uncasville the night before, ate dinner together, spent the night and held a shootaround the morning of Monday's game.

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But, if you ask Auriemma, the mood has felt different this preseason. Auriemma has had less than two weeks of official practice with this year's team but having three games in front of 15,000 fans ahead of the Huskies has set a new tone.

"What it does do," Auriemma said of having games in October, "is makes you address certain things earlier than you maybe would want to. But that's not a bad thing, you know? Having a game, it does get the players' attention, because they know there's something coming up soon that's not in November."

Auriemma's had to cram some of the schematic install to accommodate for an unprecedented third exhibition game on the calendar this year, a direct attempt to raise money for the program amidst the Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) arms race. That can help, too, though.

"In one sense, it's probably good," Auriemma said. "I think the players, when they see what happens in a game situation — it may be the exact same thing that you say in practice, and they may believe it, they may not believe it — but when it happens in a game, you go back and show them game film, it resonates maybe a little bit more."

It didn't impact Connecticut, who curb stomped Syracuse for the second time in seven months, quite as much as the 88-60 indicates, but the Huskies weren't short of errors by any means.

"I liked some of the things we did," Auriemma said, "and I'm not happy at all with some of the things that happened tonight."

In a 23-point, 9-field goal first quarter, Connecticut recorded as many assists as turnovers (4). Passes that didn't slip through the hands of unsuspecting Huskies sailed over the bench or into Syracuse's possession. All four of the Oranges' first quarter baskets came from wide-open looks at the rim, which left Auriemma palming his forehead on the sideline. Most bench conversations were spent talking about on-court mistakes.

Miscommunications are always frequent in preseason openers, no doubt, but having considerably less time to install certain phases of the gameplan certainly impacted the Huskies, especially defensively.

Still, Connecticut shot over 50% from the field in the first quarter, punctuated by Sarah Strong's opening possession pull-up 3-pointer, and built a 15-point lead by the end of the period.

Jovana Popovic, the gregarious 5-foot-9 freshman guard starting in place of the injured Blanca Quiñonez, one of three Huskies ruled out due to injury, picked off a pass and ran to the rim to give UConn its first two-possession lead. Ashlynn Shade converted an and-1 before Strong found Jana El Alfy under the basket on back-to-back possessions.

Syracuse burnt its first timeout of the night down eight points less than four minutes into the first quarter. Strong, KK Arnold and Kayleigh Heckel added seven more out of the break before freshman Olivia Vukosa scored her first preseason basket less than two minutes after checking in.

But the Orange would rally, thanks in part to a handful of interior miscommunications by the Huskies, behind a 12-2 second quarter run to close the gap to nine at the halftime break. All 12 points came in the paint; most were wide-open, or at most lightly contested, looks.

"I thought the defense in transition was really bad," Auriemma said. "And they took advantage of that. They got an awful lot of points at the rim, beating us down the floor. When you play hard and you play good defense, it makes everything go well.

Popovic and Syracuse guard Tyi Skinner traded baskets to start the third period — Connecticut's best quarter from the field and cleanest in terms of turnovers — as Popovic reached double-digit points in her Husky debut in less than 20 on-court minutes.

Popovic finished with 10 points, one of seven Huskies to finish in double figures, and hit on 5-of-7 field goals while dishing three assists in 29 minutes. Her poise, though, in her first collegiate action, was more noticeable at the point.

"I'm not nervous," Popovic said of her collegiate debut. "I don't know, being at practice, I'm so happy to play. I can't wait to be on the court, so I'm not nervous."

UConn rattled off 17 of the third quarter's final 21 points, which included a quartet of free throws from Vukosa and Arnold five straight from Kelis Fisher to end the quarter, ballooning its lead up to 20 by the start of the fourth. Syracuse scored just once in the paint in the third period and shot a moribund 5-of-16 from the field.

Fisher, El Alfy, Heckel and Vukosa joined Strong — who led the team with 15 points on 6-of-16 shooting — Popovic and Arnold in double figures in the fourth, stretching the lead as large as 31 points behind a 9-of-16 mark from the field before Olivia Schmitt knocked down a 3 with 10 seconds left to bring the margin back under 30.

"Everything," Syracuse head coach Felisha Legette-Jack said of what Strong offers on the court. "Sarah Strong's so good, man. The only reason we were very close, everybody knows, is that she's on the bench."

UConn shot 32-of-68 (47.1%) overall from the field but made just 3-of-22 triples. It eventually climbed out of its turnover slump and finished with 19 assists to 11 giveaways.

Nonetheless, there's a lot to install ahead of Texas, a likely preseason top 10 team, coming to Hartford next Monday.

"Yeah, it doesn't count in the standings," Auriemma said of Monday's game. "But it does count toward improving, and that's what they're all for — in addition to (revenue) share."



Kayleigh Heckel with the ball at the UConn Women's Basketball exhibition game against Syracuse. The game took place on Oct. 12 at the Mohegan Sun Arena.
PHOTO BY PARKER MEYERS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/ THE DAILY CAMPUS

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL:

Jovana Popovic gets the nod in exhibition matchup



Sarah Strong, Jovana Popovic, Jana El Alfy, and Ashlynn Shade share a high five before the UConn vs Syracuse Exhibition game last night. UConn led Syracuse 38-29 at halftime.
PHOTO BY PARKER MEYERS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

KK Arnold starts in her first game as a senior. The UConn Women's Basketball team played against Syracuse at an exhibition game at Mohegan Sun Arena.
PHOTO BY PARKER MEYERS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS



by Avery Becker
SPORTS EDITOR
SHE/HER/HERS
avery.becker@uconn.edu

Uncasville, Conn. -- Any former UConn women's basketball player can attest to how hard it is to impress Geno Auriemma.

Although, after a few months of showcasing her skills in practice, freshman Jovana Popovic has.

"[I'm] super impressed with how quickly she picks things up and how vocal she's becoming," Auriemma said to the media on Saturday. "I thought she'd be good, and she's been everything I thought she'd be. I'm really impressed."

Auriemma was so impressed that he gave her the nod in the starting lineup Monday night. With Azzi Fudd and Serah Williams graduating this past spring, it left a big question mark on who would play alongside Sarah Strong, KK Arnold and Ashlynn Shade for the 2026-27 season.

While this matchup was only an exhibition game, Auriemma selected Jana El Alfy, who has experience as a starter. Due to Blanca Quiñonez still rehabbing from a shoulder injury, he also selected Popovic, a 5-foot-9 freshman guard.

"She plays at a pace that all good players play," Auriemma said Monday when asked about the guard. "She doesn't get sped up. She doesn't lose her composure out there. She knows what she's good at."

Before even stepping foot on campus, Popovic collected many accolades. She played for ZKK Art Basket for the First League of Serbia and played for the Serbian National Team in the FIBA EuroBasket in 2025.

As a guard for Art Basket, she averaged 27.1 points per game, winning a championship in the 2023-24 season.

Just within the first few days she was playing with the squad, Auriemma had glowing remarks for Popovic.

"[She's] smart, fits in easily, good student, picks things up quickly on the court. She's a little taller than I thought," Auriemma said this past June when asked about the guard. "For the first four, five days that she's been here, I think she's done what I hope she would do exactly," Auriemma said on Monday.

In the exhibition matchup against the Orange, Husky fans saw her skills on full display.

Alongside six of her teammates, she also racked up points in double figures.

She finished the evening with 10 points, shooting 5-7 from the field, and dished out three assists. These stats were accumulated in 31 minutes on the court, the most out of anyone on UConn's roster.

Making that transition from European to American basketball is tough for any player, but Popovic emphasized that hanging out with her teammates has helped her with that.

Popovic completes the puzzle for UConn this season, bringing an edge to the hardwood that Husky fans haven't seen in years past.

"As she puts all the pieces together, she's going to be a big, big help to us [...] she's found a little niche for herself," Auriemma said on Monday.

To see Popovic back in action, the Huskies will clash against the Texas Longhorns on Monday, Oct. 19 for another exhibition matchup.

Tip-off is scheduled for 7 p.m. from PeoplesBank Arena in Hartford, Conn. Husky fans can tune in to the matchup on WFSB or UConn+.