WOMEN'S BASKETBALL:
Five takeaways from UConn's preseason win over Syracuse

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

UNCASVILLE — Geno Auriemma sat at the podium following UConn women's basketball's 88-60 win over Syracuse Monday resting his head on one hand and tapping the stat sheet in front of him with the other.

His taps echoed from the microphone on the podium and through the speakers flanking him to either side as a wry smile began dotting his face.

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

A lot happened in the Huskies' preseason opener, including Jovana Popovic, a 5-foot-9 true freshman, getting a start in her first taste of collegiate action and Olivia Vukosa, another newbie, leading the team in rebounds.

Below are five takeaways from the first 40 minutes of the UConn basketball season.

There are four ball handlers capable of playing 20 minutes a game on the roster

Popovic joined senior KK Arnold in the starting lineup and scored 10 points on 5-of-7 shooting in a confident display of offense. Likewise, Arnold scored 11 points on three made field goals, shooting 5-of-7 from the free throw line.

Junior Kayleigh Heckel came off the bench and hit two of UConn's three 3-pointers, scored 10 points and grabbed three rebounds in 18 minutes. Sophomore Kelis Fisher scored 11 points in 12 minutes and was active from all areas on the floor, adding five from the charity stripe.

Arnold and Heckel — and, to an extent, Fisher — were already expected to contribute major minutes, but the early emergence of Popovic gives UConn four quality ball handlers, all with vastly different skillsets, to space out across 40 minutes each game.

"She's going to be a big help to us because she's different than KK," Auriemma said of Popovic. "She's different than Kayleigh Heckel, you know? She's certainly different than Kelis, but then again, everybody else is, too."

The rotation will be deep at full strength

Assuming enough players are healthy, Auriemma's rotations usually hover at nine deep, with the starters typically — although not always — averaging over 20 minutes per game.

That's relatively standard, but Connecticut's depth, especially in the backcourt, could stretch the rotation 10 or — gasp! — 11 deep in 2026-27.

Granted, Monday's game was the preseason tip-off, meaning a handful of lineups that were on the court will likely be erased in three weeks, and three Huskies — Blanca Quiñonez, Allie Ziebell and Marine Dursus — were sidelined by injury, but seven of the 10 players who got on the court finished in double figures.

The starting lineup, assuming Quiñonez remains on schedule to play on Nov. 2 against Cornell, seems solidified with Arnold, Ashlynn Shade, Quiñonez, Sarah Strong and Jana El Alfy, meaning Popovic, Heckel, Ziebell, Fisher, Vukosa and Morgan Cheli will all compete for the remaining minutes off the bench.

Have fun, Coach.

Getting Quiñonez back will remedy the defensive woes

Quiñonez, who's still recovering from off-season surgery to repair a torn labrum, is expected to assume the No. 2 scoring role behind Strong in the starting lineup. The 2025-26 Big East Freshman of the Year averaged 10.7 points in just over 20 minutes per game last season and offered a tremendous offensive boost off the bench, finishing as the team's third-leading scorer.

But it was often Quiñonez's defensive spunk — particularly on-the-ball — that helped her carve out such a large role as a freshman and helped UConn finish as the No. 1 defense nationally in defensive efficiency last season.

That edge and awareness was noticeably missing from UConn's defense at times on Monday, particularly during the second quarter, when Syracuse shot 50% from the field and scored eight points in the paint.

Getting Quiñonez back as the team's fiery wing defender to complement Arnold and Heckel up top and Strong and El Alfy down low will do more for Connecticut's defense, which should again rank near the top of the country, than anything.

Don't read too much into the poor 3-point shooting

UConn shot 3-of-22 from 3 against the Orange, good for a ghastly 13.6% mark overall, and sank only two triples across its final 73 possessions after Sarah Strong nailed a pullup three to open the game.

That isn't particularly efficient, and Syracuse Head Coach Felisha Legette-Jack even admitted post-game that the Orange backed off the 3-point line in the second half to protect the paint. But remember, UConn didn't have two of its top 3-point shooters in Ziebell (ankle) and Quiñonez (shoulder) available, and the uber-efficient Strong shot just 5-of-15 from the field after her opening possession make.

Ashlynn Shade, who's famously caught fire from three at Mohegan Sun Arena, only attempted twice from deep while



UConn women's basketball faces Syracuse in an exhibition game Monday, Oct. 12, 2026, at Mohegan Sun Arena in Uncasville. The Huskies defeated the Orange 88-60 in their first action of the season as part of the Hall of Fame Series Exhibition.

PHOTO BY PARKER MEYERS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Popovic, who's shown brilliant flashes from behind the line this off season, only shot one 3-ball.

The silver lining: UConn, after shooting 2-of-15 from deep in the first half, only attempted seven 3's in the final 20 minutes and poured in a combined 45 points in the paint and off turnovers as it stretched its lead as large as 31 points.

UConn showed it knows how to win, even if it's ugly at times

UConn won the rebounding battle (42-38), turned the ball over less (11-7), recorded more assists (19-8) and tripled Syracuse's steals (12-4) while getting just nine points from 3 in a 28-point win.

The Huskies racked up 25 points off turnovers, 56 in the paint and 33 off the bench while — surprisingly — shooting 21-of-24 from the charity stripe.

It wasn't pretty for most of the first half but Connecticut found what worked by way of driving to the basket and relentlessly rebounding on the offensive glass to rebuild and eventually double its first quarter lead of 15 points.

WNBA END-OF-SEASON AWARDS:
HONORING THIS SEASON'S TOP PLAYERS

by Meredith Lloyd
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
SHE/HER/HERS
meredith.lloyd@uconn.edu

The WNBA had plenty to celebrate this year, from its 30th season to exceptional performances by emerging rookies and seasoned stars. Between standout defensive performances and game-changing contributions off the bench, this season brought unforgettable moments across the league. The 2026 Kia WNBA end-of-season awards recognize players whose performances made the biggest impact.

Most Valuable Player

A'ja Wilson became the first player in WNBA history to be named Most Valuable Player for three straight seasons. The Las Vegas Aces center-forward won her fifth MVP award, extending her own league record.

This season, Wilson's 26.2-point scoring average was the second-highest in league history, behind her 26.9 points per game in 2024. She rounded out her stat line with 9.4 rebounds, 3.2 assists, 1.9 blocks and 1.4 steals per game. Wilson set the standard on both ends of the floor, finishing as the league's scoring leader for the third consecutive season and leading in blocks per game for a fifth straight year.

"15-year-old A'ja wasn't sitting up here dreaming about being a five-time MVP. She wasn't dreaming about being a three-time champion," Wilson reflected in a press conference. "She was dreaming about surviving this world. So for me to sit up here surrounded by these trophies ... it means a little bit more to me."



Angel Reese and Rhyne Howard finishing a dap up during a game against New York Liberty. The Dream won 85-83 against the Liberty on Oct. 9, 2026.

PHOTO COURTESY OF @ATLANTADREAM ON INSTAGRAM

Defensive Player of the Year

In her inaugural season with the Atlanta Dream, Angel Reese won Defensive Player of the Year, a first in franchise history. All year, Reese dominated the glass, leading the league in rebounds per game (12.1). She ranked third in total defensive rebounds (315), steals per game (1.8) and total steals (77).

After winning her first postseason award, Reese credited her teammates in a press release. "I have the trophy, but I definitely want Jordin [Canada] and Rhyne [Howard] to sign it because I think they deserve it just as much as I do." The work isn't done for Reese and the Dream, who will travel to Golden State for Game 1 of the WNBA Finals.

Rookie of the Year

Point guard Olivia Miles joins the ranks of unanimous Rookie of the Year recipients. After playing at Texas Christian University, Miles was drafted second overall by the Minnesota Lynx. She led Minnesota to the No. 1 seed, contributing to the Lynx's success while navigating most of the season without star Napheesa Collier.

Individually, Miles boasted an impressive stat line of 19.8 points, 6.0 assists and 4.7 rebounds per game. With a total of 790 points, Miles also claimed the WNBA record for points scored in a rookie season.

League commissioner Cathy Engelbert presented Miles' award with high praise.

"The skill, confidence and poise you've shown in just your first season has been nothing short of extraordinary," Engelbert said. "I knew when I called your name on draft night I would be standing here."

Most Improved Player

Rebuilding the roster was a top priority for the Dallas Wings, and signing Jessica Shepard was a key move. Shepard played five seasons for Minnesota, where she contributed steadily as a role player. In the Wings lineup, Shepard stepped into the new responsibility of an offensive leader.

With Dallas, Shepard averaged career highs of 14.5 points, 11.1 rebounds and 5.3 assists per game. She led the league with six triple-doubles for the season and made her WNBA All-Star debut as a starter. She capped off the transformative season by winning Most Improved Player.

"More than anything, I feel grateful for the people who stayed by my side through every version of me," Shepard said on Instagram. "The people who celebrated the good days, sat with me through the hard ones, and believed in me when I struggled to believe in myself."

Sixth Player of the Year

The Golden State Valkyries are headed to their first WNBA Finals, with help from sophomore Janelle Salaün. The 6-foot-2 forward made 40 appearances for Golden State, bringing a surge of offensive intensity off the bench.

Salaün was unanimously named Sixth Player of the Year after leading league reserves with a career-high 12.7 points per game. Salaün also set several WNBA single-season reserve records, including total points (509), three-pointers made (93) and games with double-digit points (27). Golden State will look for Salaün's scoring off the bench in their battle for the WNBA championship trophy.

The WNBA postseason continues Saturday, Oct. 17, with the opening game of the Finals. Tipoff is scheduled for 3:30 p.m. ET at the Chase Center in San Francisco. The game will be available to stream on CNBC, USA Network and Peacock.