

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL:

FOUR TAKEAWAYS FROM UCONN'S OPEN PRACTICE AT SACRED HEART

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FAIRFIELD — For most of Sunday's open practice at Sacred Heart University, University of Connecticut women's basketball coach Geno Auriemma, who never moved from his perch on the bench, sprawled his arms over the chairs next to him and sat with a blithe grin while his team flew around the Pitt Center court.

Although his carefree and gregarious demeanor didn't signal it, Auriemma, entering year 42 at the helm in Storrs, is still adjusting to the rapidly changing — and bizarrely confusing — landscape of college basketball.

"We used to not be able to start practicing until Oct. 15," Auriemma said. "Now we have a scrimmage in front of people on Oct. 12. So, yeah, a lot's changed since 1985."

A lot's changed since June, Coach.

UConn's roster was unbothered by the sport-altering installment of the age-based eligibility model this offseason, but the Huskies are still being sped up this preseason by an unprecedented third exhibition game cramming the calendar.

An earlier start date — and an unquenchable thirst to bring in more money to the program — allowed the world to get its first glimpse at the remodeled Huskies Sunday at an open practice at Sacred Heart. Here are our four takeaways.

Becker: The 2026-2027 starting lineup prediction

This past April brought the exit of two key members to UConn lineup, Azzi Fudd and Serah Williams to the WNBA. Now, the Huskies enter this season with two voids to fill in the starting lineup.

During the open practice, the squad scrimmaged against their practice players. The first five players Auriemma sent out?

Jana El Alfy, Ashlynn Shade, KK Arnold, Kayleigh Heckel and Sarah Strong.

With those being the most experienced players on the roster, it would make sense that Auriemma would use them as his starting lineup to begin the program 2026-2027 campaign.

Not to mention, El Alfy, Shade and Strong made up 2/5 of the lineup when the Huskies won their 2025 National Championship.

Although, it spans beyond much more than that.

Auriemma has shown throughout his coaching tenure of liking a guard-heavy, tenacious start-



UConn Women's Basketball plays Southern Connecticut State University at PeoplesBank Arena in Hartford, Conn. on Oct. 26, 2025. The Huskies dominated, and ended the game with a 105-39 win against the Owls. FILE PHOTO/THE DAILY CAMPUS.



UConn Women's Basketball Coach Geno Auriemma and Azzi Fudd stand together. The Huskies played Southern Connecticut State University at PeoplesBank Arena in Hartford, Conn. on Oct. 26, 2025. FILE PHOTO / THE DAILY CAMPUS.

ing lineup, which Arnold, Shade and Heckel all bring to the table.

As upperclassmen this year, they will each have a new role they will need to facilitate on the team.

Time and time again, Arnold has proved to be the fire the Huskies need on defense, but Auriemma expects her role to become greater this season.

"Her [Arnold] responsibility is gonna be pretty big this year," Auriemma said to the media on Sunday.

With El Alfy at center and Strong at power forward, fans will see a more developed version of the two they saw in Tampa.

After losing to South Carolina in the Final Four this past March, the Huskies will enter this season with a sense of unfinished business. With this starting lineup, it will be a season Husky fans will not want to miss.

McCreven: Heckel looks the part of a high-major starter — and she may be just that

The most noticeable takeaway from Sunday's 80-minute practice?

Heckel looked considerably more confident and comfortable as an offensive initiator in the starting lineup.

As noted above, Heckel "started" the scrimmage portion of practice alongside Arnold (two ball handlers!) and, while preseason intersquad scrimmage lineups need to be taken with a snowbank of salt, she was the second-best

scorer on the court after Strong — and was certainly the most decisive.

Heckel scored on a pair of early downhill drives, slashing through two defenders en route to the hoop and laying the ball off the glass with her left hand. She was also often used as the offensive reset at the top of the key, commanding the offense from three feet behind the arc.

A noticeably more confident Heckel, who clearly added more muscle in the offseason, can completely change the Huskies' offensive outlook heading into 2026-27.

Becker: The birthday girl shines in Fairfield

While Sept. 20 marked the program's open practice, it also happened to mark El Alfy turning 21.

Since joining the squad in January of 2023 and not seeing game action until the 2024-25 season, it's safe to say El Alfy has experienced a lot of adversity as a Husky.

In her first season playing, the Cairo, Egypt native was immediately thrown into the mix, starting high-stakes games. The 6-foot-5 guard appeared in 40 games and started 27, including the National Championship game.

Last year, she took a step back, starting only in one game and averaging 4.0 points and 4.1 rebounds per game.

Now, as the longest-tenured player on the roster, El Alfy has big shoes to fill.

However, at Sacred

Heart, fans got to see a side of El Alfy they had never seen before.

El Alfy competed against Shade in a three-pointer contest. With 16 shots made, she edged out Shade to push herself past the first round.

Even though El Alfy lost to Strong in the Championship round, seeing this dominant display is a positive sign for Husky fans.

McCreven: Injuries are already a problem for UConn Only nine of the 13 rostered Huskies practiced Sunday as Blanca Quiñonez, Morgan Cheli, Allie Ziebell and Marine Dursus all stood behind the team in sweats during team drills.

Quiñonez is still recovering from off-season shoulder surgery that shut her down for the summer. She remains on track to return for UConn's opener against Cornell, according to Auriemma.

Ziebell was introduced to the Sacred Heart crowd wearing a boot on her right foot. Auriemma said Ziebell twisted her ankle during the first practice drill last week and has been out since.

He went on to say Dursus has been nursing a foot injury from her time in France and should be fine for the opener.

Cheli, though, Auriemma wasn't so sure about.

"Morgan, they told me she'd be ready," Auriemma grimaced, putting his hands in the air and shaking his head.