

Jeff Goldberg: UConn women’s basketball history through a journalist’s lens

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

There have been many iconic moments in the history of UConn women’s basketball.

Some may remember when the team won their first National Championship in 1995 and Rebecca Lobo ran down the court with her hands in the air.

Others may recall when Sue Bird drained the three-pointer to win the Big East Championship against Notre Dame.

Younger fans may still reminisce when Geno Auriemma and Paige Bueckers shared a warm embrace after winning the program’s 12th National Championship.

For Husky fans and followers of collegiate basketball, the UConn women’s basketball program is a dynasty.

This past August, they had a documentary on Apple TV+ called “The Dynasty: UConn Huskies,” highlighting the program and its 40-year tenure with Auriemma at the helm.

Jeff Goldberg, a writer for the Hartford Courant who covered the Huskies from 2001-2006, was featured in this documentary.

For Goldberg, this dynasty solidified itself in 2002, when Sue Bird and Diana Taurasi were on the same squad -- not in any of the moments mentioned above.

Before witnessing that moment, though, he had to get there first.

Goldberg has been connected to the Courant ever since the 80s, when his mom worked there in the features department.

He joined the Courant’s intern program in the summer between his sophomore and junior years of high school.

“Being a sportswriter was something I always wanted to do. I’ve been a sports fan since I was old enough to do anything really, you know,” Goldberg said. “And so, covering the Red Sox was always my dream.”

Goldberg’s first job, you may ask?

He filed photos alongside former NBA insider for ESPN, Adrian Wojnarowski. Afterwards he went to college at Central Connecticut State and worked for the school paper updating the box scores for their athletic teams.

It wasn’t until the mid-90s, though, when Goldberg got to start writing for the Courant. Around 1997, Goldberg started writing about UConn through a blog as the internet slowly became the new normal.



Former Hartford Courant reporter Jeff Goldberg poses for a photo. Goldberg previously covered the UConn women’s basketball team for the newspaper. PHOTO COURTESY OF LINKEDIN

Goldberg witnessed the UConn Men’s program win their first National Championship in 1999 and then took part in the coverage of the women’s Championship in Philadelphia in 2000.

In the summer of 2001, the Courant promoted Goldberg to cover the women’s program full-time.

“It was a long journey, but I got to do a lot of really interesting things along the way,” Goldberg said.

When Goldberg received his promotion, it was during the aftermath of UConn losing to Notre Dame in the Final Four, 90-75.

“It’s like the old silent movies -- car wheels fall off and the doors fall off and the engine falls out,” Goldberg said on the 2001 loss. “That’s basically what happened to them in the second half of that game. They just completely melted down and collapsed.”

After that devastating loss, the squad entered their 2001-2002 campaign with a chip on their shoulder. Bird, Swin Cash, Ashja Jones, Tamika Williams were entering their senior year. Sophomore Diana Taurasi, who Goldberg likes to call “the Fifth Beatle,” also joins the mix.

“They carried the memory of that loss on their shoulders, the biggest chip on the shoulder of all time,” Goldberg said. “So, that team just went out and destroyed everyone because they had made up their minds.”

In his first year on the beat, the women’s program went 39-0 and famously won the National Cham-

pionship in San Antonio, Texas, in what would be the start of the dynasty.

“To me, it was the failed expectations of the 2001 season,” Goldberg said. “That to me was the moment that turned them into the dynasty that they became. Like they just decided they were never going to feel that way again.”

Once Bird, Cash, Jones and Williams had graduated, Goldberg described Taurasi in her junior and senior years as a “force of nature.”

Taurasi took it upon herself in her last two seasons to carry her teams to win the next two National Championships in 2003 and 2004.

“[She] just took the whole sport over,” Goldberg said. “That’s why again, they won those three in a row, and then they didn’t win another one for another five or six years because [Diana] was such a force. It was impossible, really, to replace her.”

That “five or six years later” is when Tina Charles and Maya Moore came and won back-to-back Championships to continue that legacy.

“Losing in St. Louis in the Final Four to Notre Dame was a watershed moment for the program, and it really did,” Goldberg said. “Their whole mindset changed from that, that they were never going to let themselves have a loss, and it took 40 years for them to have a loss like that again.”

After that loss, they were never going to get beaten again.

The UConn women’s basketball program has

earned the dynasty name-sake throughout its over 50-year tenure as a varsity team.

However, behind every juggernaut is its chieftain. For the Huskies, that’s Auriemma.

A native of Montella, Italy, Auriemma immigrated to the United States when he was seven to Philadelphia, Penn.

Anyone who knows Auriemma, though, is aware of his Philly flair. He brings this flair to his practices and games, encouraging his players to be the best they can be.

“Does he come off the wrong way a lot of the time? Sure, but he cares,” Goldberg said. “He cares about his players. He cared about us in the media. He was fantastic, and I miss him terribly.”

Goldberg said that when he was finished with the beat, people would often come up to him and say, “Oh, you must be so excited you don’t have to deal with him anymore.”

To which Goldberg would respond with how he misses Auriemma and his time on the beat.

“That was my first beat job,” Goldberg said. “I didn’t appreciate how good I even had it until after I left. He is so misunderstood by people outside [of] Connecticut.”

Auriemma, though, knows how to make his players better. He knows how to push the right buttons psychologically to get to where they need to be.

“They didn’t always get it when it was happening, but he was just preparing them to be the best they could be,” Goldberg said. “They al-

most always got it.”

Goldberg recalls a time when he was on the beat with an altercation involving Bird and Auriemma.

It was during the 2001-2002 season in late January, early February, after a too close for comfort win against Virginia Tech.

According to Goldberg, Auriemma was on Bird all throughout the last 30 minutes of practice that the media got to see. Bird attempted to block a shot from one of the practice players, to which Auriemma claimed she had fouled him instead. Both of them ended up in an altercation that resulted with Bird in tears.

“She had like pulled her shirt up over her head because she didn’t want anybody to see the tears flowing down,” Goldberg said. “She’s crying because he has broken her. Why did he do that? Because he was worried that they had kind of lost their edge.”

Auriemma had picked Bird as a target, because he knew she would be the one to take it the best and then light a fire underneath her team.

Not only was Auriemma trying to send a message to Bird, but he was also trying to send a message to his team as well.

“[Bird] handled it just fine, and you know she was the best player on the floor of all of them in the NCAA tournament,” Goldberg said.

Now, nearly 25 years after the start of the dynasty, Auriemma and his squad have 12 National Championships and he is the winningest coach in college basketball history.

“[Auriemma] wanted the players to overcome him and show him that they’re better than what he was dishing at them,” Goldberg said. “Nothing made [Auriemma] happier than that. That’s what [Auriemma] wanted.”

As far as the future of the program goes, Goldberg expects business to keep following its regularly scheduled programming.

“I just feel like what happens with him is that [Auriemma] brings in a new class and these new players, and [Auriemma] just doesn’t want to abandon them,” Goldberg said.

Whether a player is commencing their journey as upperclassmen, like Sarah Strong, or just starting, like Olivia Vukosa, Goldberg says Auriemma will want to experience all of it with them, including the highs and the lows.

“As long as the players are responding to him, and as long as he feels like he’s doing a good job. I don’t know why he would stop,” Goldberg says.



UConn women’s basketball national championship banners hang in Gampel Pavillion in Storrs, CT. These banners commemorated the Huskies’ NCAA tournament victories. PHOTO BY MADISON HENDRICKS, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS