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WOMEN'S COLLEGE BASKETBALL

AS GENO AURIEMMA BEGINS YEAR 40 AT UCONN, HE HOPES THE FUTURE LOOKS MORE LIKE THE PAST

At 70, Auriemma wants another title, but it has been eight long years since his last one

EDEN LAASE | 0 | PUBLISHED: NOVEMBER 10, 2024 5:05 PM

WITH HIS 40TH SEASON IN STORRS UNDERWAY, GENO AURIEMMA IS DETERMINED TO BRING UCONN BACK TO THE TOP OF WOMEN'S BASKETBALL. GETTY

STORRS — Eleven was a good age for Geno Auriemma. It's one he revisits when hit with a wave of nostalgia. Auriemma often thinks of the past, but never with the desire to return, except for that year. He would be 11 again if he could.

That was the year he discovered organized baseball.

When he was nine years old, Auriemma's family came to the United States from Italy and moved in with his aunt and uncle. They traveled across an ocean, but in Pennsylvania, Auriemma's world felt small. His school was down the block and across the street and attached to the school was a playground. Everything in Auriemma's life happened in that little square of land. On the playground he learned to speak English and on an adjacent field he played baseball with his friends.

Two years later, Auriemma's family moved into their own place. And when they did, Auriemma learned about Little League.

"I was like, 'Are you kidding me? There is a league where you can play for real?'" he says. "We always just played for fun."

You can see Auriemma returning to that moment in his mind. He tilts his head slightly and smiles. Physically, the 70-year old basketball coach is in his office, surrounded by trophies and jerseys, about to embark on his 40th season at the helm of the UConn women's basketball team. Tucked in the corner is a golf bag, with a few miscellaneous clubs he likes to fiddle with during his downtime. But Auriemma no longer sees any of it. Right now, he's an 11-year-old with a baseball glove in his hand.

Down the block from his house there was a big hill, Auriemma recalls, relaying the directions he keeps locked in the creases of his memory. Then, after a right turn there's railroad tracks. After the tracks he would hit a creek and tiptoe carefully across the stones.

And then, there it was.

"Voila," he says, spreading his arms wide. "Field of Dreams."

At that moment, Auriemma's world felt bigger.

Auriemma isn't ready for his coaching career to become a nostalgic memory. He ascended to the peak of college basketball in 2016 after winning his 11th title, but since then, other teams started climbing, too. Kim Mulkey won her fourth title in 2023 and Dawn Staley has three in the last eight years.

This season Auriemma will pass former Stanford coach Tara VanDerveer's record mark of 1,216 wins and when he does, he will have officially done it all. But the coach has his eye on another number: Eight.

"It's been eight years since we last won a National Championship," he says. "I want to win one for this group to remind everybody that UConn is still making history."

His group has the goods to add to that legacy. Paige Bueckers was named Player of the Year as a freshman, before injuries hampered her next two seasons. Last year, when she was finally healthy, Bueckers led UConn to a Final Four. Then, there's Azzi Fudd, a pure shooter, who despite her own injury struggles, says she feels stronger than ever coming into this season. Add in seven more five-star recruits over the last three seasons and you have a team with the potential to break that eight-year draught.

CAITLIN CLARK AND PAIGE BUECKERS FACE OFF IN A 2024 WOMEN'S FINAL FOUR SEMIFINAL GAME. STEPH CHAMBERS/GETTY

At UConn, eight years without a title might as well be an eternity. The first time the Huskies won a title in 1995, the team came back to Storrs and had a celebratory parade. A helicopter flew over, fire engines parked on the overpass shooting water and people lined the streets to cheer as they passed.

When the Huskies won in 2016 — the last title in a string of four in a row — cars honked at the team bus to get out of the way. Winning titles had become something to be expected, not to be celebrated. "When you make things look so easy, people expect it, including me," Auriemma says. "But it's not a birthright. You gotta earn it still."

The 2022-23 season served as a reminder of that. UConn had been to 14 Final Fours in a row, but after an injury-riddled season played without Bueckers, the streak came to an end. "I kind of liked that it ended," Auriemma says. "Not at the time, and not how it happened. But now, when I tell people that this is really hard, they will believe it."

Auriemma has a reputation as a hard ass. It has come from 40 years of demanding excellence from his players and 11 national titles worth of press conferences clipped into biting one-liners and sarcastic slogans. But at his core, the coach who is regarded as one of the best to ever do it is a softie.

On this day, UConn practices late in the afternoon. Auriemma wears a black sweatsuit and carries a thermos of coffee. He needs it to keep his energy up. Auriemma doesn't like practicing this late, but it's a concession he made to get Princeton graduate transfer Kaitlyn Chen in a Huskies uniform. They have to work around her class schedule.

As the players go through a series of warmup drills, Auriemma bounces around the sidelines. "See her?" he says, before launching into a string of compliments about each of his players. "These kids are like my grandkids," he admits. But Auriemma is still a coach and no one gets away without a little constructive criticism. Each serving of compliments is punctuated with a dash of hard truth.

And when he gives it, everybody listens. It's the kind of respect that's earned, not by winning 11 championships, but by dedicating 40 years to building relationships. "How can you argue with him?" Ashlynn Shade says.

Auriemma is sarcastic and funny and critical and empowering all at once. Even his players have a hard time describing him sometimes, but they tend to agree on one thing. "He's just a genius," Azzi Fudd says. "He knows what you're capable of and he's going to hold you to that standard. He's not going to let you be anything less."

SENIOR GUARD AZZI FUDD CALLS COACH AURIEMMA "A GENIUS." GETTY

High standards? Yes. A genius? Absolutely not, Auriemma says. "They are dumber than I thought if they think that," he jokes. "I don't know that I'm a genius in basketball, or a genius in anything. But I do give myself credit that I'm very good with people and that I can connect with them."

That goes back to his childhood. Before the baseball field, when Auriemma lived with his aunt and uncle and didn't speak English, he learned body language. He could detect how someone was feeling, what they were thinking, by the way they held their head and by the look in their eyes. Auriemma learned how to put himself into other people's shoes to figure out what they really need from him. It's also a trial-and-error process. "Sometimes I'll go home and think, 'Man, I was a shithead to that kid today. I wouldn't want to play for me if I was her,'" he says.

But those who thrive under Auriemma — and there are plenty of success stories — know you have to take the toughness to get the softness. He's different depending on the environment, too. On the court, it's mostly the gritty stalwart. But in his office, Fudd says, you can catch Auriemma in a softer mood. One where he talks about life while practicing his putting stroke.

When Auriemma first started coaching high schoolers, he was 21 years old. The gap between them was small enough where it was easy to relate. The same happened when he took over UConn at 30. Now, at 70, there is so much life lived between him and the 18-year-olds that come to campus.

Back then, he was patient. The Huskies were last in the Big East when he arrived and the only goal was to "be something other than last." That quickly changed to conference championships, Final Fours and National Titles. At 30, Auriemma had all the time in the world to teach his players. Now, he feels the shortened timeline.

"I want my players to get things quicker," he says. "Maybe it's because I'm older and I don't want to wait any longer."

He also wants them to get it right, so he can know he didn't get it wrong.

He's about to be the winningest coach in college basketball, yet Auriemma still often finds himself plagued by the fear of messing up. In a career that looks like perfection, Auriemma insists he's made mistakes. Most of them came when he couldn't get out of his own head. If he hadn't overthought at the end of games, Auriemma says, his team could have made it to the national title games in 2001, 2017 and 2018. Then maybe he could have added three more championships to his legacy.

Auriemma's wife Kathy is into astrology, so he knows a bit about the various signs and charts. "I'm an Aries, which means I have no faults," he says with a laugh. But if he was born three days earlier, Auriemma would be a Pisces. And when Auriemma looks at that symbol, he feels a connection. It's two fish swimming in opposite directions. "That's me," he says. "Every time I'm faced with a question, I go in both directions."

Direction one says that he's done everything he can do as a coach. Direction two says there is still more to accomplish. Direction one says teams are getting better and UConn can't stay on top forever. Direction two says the Huskies still have more Final Fours than every other team, which means the gap between UConn and everybody else is still there.

That's the battle between the two fish in Auriemma's head. Doubt lost him three Final Fours, but it also won him 12 others. It keeps him fighting for more.

"I think I'm the best coach that's ever lived," he says. "But then every day it's like, 'Am I? Do I know what I'm doing? Or am I just lucky?' "

When Auriemma was a senior in high school, he got asked to prom by "a gorgeous girl." He remembers it because he didn't go. Auriemma had promised a friend he would give his little sister a ride home from work and even though other arrangements could have probably been made, Auriemma didn't want to go back on his word.

He would have felt guilty either way. Guilty for saying no to the girl who had asked him, or guilty for backing out of giving a friend's little sister a ride.

"I'm not good at saying no," he says.

That's how his coaching career started. A friend who had just returned from serving in Vietnam asked Auriemma to help him coach a high school girls basketball team. Originally, Auriemma said no. But the friend kept asking and eventually, Auriemma couldn't take the feeling that he was letting him down. So he said yes.

He still feels the same way about his players. They come to UConn to win championships and he doesn't want them to leave disappointed. When Bueckers committed to the Huskies, she buoyantly announced her desire to win four national titles. Now, in her last season, Bueckers still doesn't have one.

CAN PAIGE BUECKERS AND GENO AURIEMMA LEAD UCONN BACK TO THE MOUNTAINTOP THIS SEASON? GETTY

One fish knows it's not possible to win every season, but the other wants to. One fish thinks it may be time to hang it up, but the other says he can coach forever. One fish says the success Auriemma has had is impossible to recreate, but the other says why not try?

Auriemma doesn't seem like a coach who's going anywhere any time soon. He answers questions with a thoughtful hand stroking his chin, contemplating every word. And he's planning for the future. ESPN's No. 1 ranked freshman Sarah Strong, he says, is a versatile player who could "change the trajectory of the program." A program that's spent years looking down as other programs do everything to catch up. It might seem impossible, and he even says as much, but there's a part of Auriemma that thinks UConn can create that gap again.

He's been on top of the mountain for decades, looking down. Now, as other programs continue to gain ground, Auriemma needs a new way to create separation. Maybe instead of up, there's forward. If he keeps walking, Aureimma knows he can find what he's looking for.

Voila. Field of Dreams.

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About Eden Laase
Eden Laase has been covering women's basketball exclusively for the last four years. Before that she spent time as a beat writer covering Gonzaga men's basketball, college hockey in Colorado, and high school sports in Michigan. Eden's work has appeared in Sports Illustrated, Just Women's Sports, Yahoo, the Boston Globe and more.
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