

UConn's Bird talk of Philly

The play of Huskies guard hard to put into words

By Gwenn Miller
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

It's a rare occasion when Geno Auriemma is silent or at loss for words.

But when the Connecticut women's basketball coach isn't quite as articulate as usual, it has to be something important.

Huskies point guard Sue Bird is one of those subjects that can silence the verbose Auriemma. Perhaps it's because the sophomore could impress the harshest of basketball critics.

This past weekend at the Final Four in Philadelphia, Auriemma fielded questions ranging from press defenses to cheesesteaks. He answered them with wit and candor, except for questions about Bird.

"Hard to put into words, really, what the kid does," Auriemma said. "She sees the game the way coaches see the game. For a young player, she's surprised me a lot of times for how composed she is."

But her composure, as well as her intelligence, accurate long-range shooting and defensive presence hasn't been recognized much beyond the Huskies' camp. The Syosset, N.Y., native has been nominated for awards, but has yet to be on the receiving end of any of those prizes.

When great point guards were mentioned this season, Bird's name was merely whispered while people screamed in support of

"Sue Bird, there's not enough I can say about her. She does not get enough recognition."

Geno Auriemma
Connecticut coach

Penn State's Helen Darling and Rutgers' Tasha Pointer. Despite averaging 10.9 points and dishing 151 assists, her value was Connecticut's best-kept secret.

"Sue Bird, there's not enough I can say about her," Auriemma said. "She does not get enough recognition. She has been the MVP of our team this year."

While Auriemma sees Bird's lack of recognition as an injustice, the even-tempered Bird seemed unaffected.

"I wasn't really expecting it," she said. "I knew coming into this year what my role was going to be on this team. A lot of people said, 'Does Connecticut really have a point guard and who's going to take over that role?'"

Bird might be doubted by critics and overlooked by those with the power of the vote, but she said she doesn't mind the lack of recognition. Both she and her teammates know her worth — and it might never have

been more evident than it was against Penn State.

Bird calmly knocked down five 3-pointers as the Lady Lions rushed at her. She dished five assists after penetrating Penn State's defense. And she held her team together when the Lions made runs.

It's what point guards are expected to do, but Bird's lack of experience made it all the more surprising.

Not only is she a sophomore, but she tore the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in her left knee last December and missed the remainder of the season.

But her dedication to her rehabilitation and support of her coaches and teammates put Bird back on the court — and into a pressure position.

"As far as recovering from her knee, you have to attribute all that to her," teammate and fellow ACL-victim Shea Ralph said. "She had a couple of questions in the beginning, but once you get the ball rolling, it's all up to you whether it comes back to you or not."

Auriemma might have been silenced at first, but after numerous Sue Bird inquiries, the praise began to spout forth.

"She's played only about 40-some odd games and without her, there's no way we'd be here," Auriemma said. "The kid's got a lot of guts."

And an uncanny ability to occasionally silence Auriemma.



Barbara Ovrutsky/Collegian

UConn's Sue Bird defends Lady Lions guard Helen Darling in the Huskies win against PSU.

Tennessee, Connecticut bring rivalry to women's collegiate athletics

By Gwenn Miller
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

It's been compared to the 49ers and the Cowboys, Michigan and Ohio State and the Yankees and the Dodgers.

And the rivalry between the Connecticut and Tennessee women's basketball teams is just as big as the older grudge matches, but it's a little different. Quite possibly, a women's sports rivalry has never generated as much excitement, hype and bad blood as these two schools.

Off the court, players and coaches are calm and polite.

On court, the contention is thicker than a swarm of flies on hot summer day. And like flies, the two teams refuse to leave give one another peace until one gets what they want.

"I view this rivalry as a class act," Connecticut forward Swin Cash said. "Off the

court, you can have a conversation.

But once you lace up the shoestrings and you're on the court, it's just strictly business."

The latest chapter in the continuing clash between the Lady Volunteers and the Huskies ended Sunday when Connecticut won the national championship, 71-52.

It marked the end of a season that saw two battles between the two women's powerhouses.

In the first meeting, Tennessee won 72-71 on Connecticut's home turf. In the second, the Huskies stole a 74-67 victory at the home of the Lady Vols.

The season split built the rivalry's excitement.

"Coach was saying we have a million tapes of them and they have a million tapes of us," Connecticut forward Shea Ralph said. "You can scout all you want, but it comes down to

"We have a million tapes of them and they have a million tapes of us."

Shae Ralph
Connecticut forward

who's more prepared." Since 1995, the record between the two teams is 6-5. Huskies coach Geno Auriemma has won two NCAA titles — both against Pat Summitt's Lady Vols.

The first crown was the 70-64 win April 2, 1995.

But Summitt has won more titles than Auriemma — four more to be exact. She's compiled a 758-150 career record, while Auriemma sports a 357-94 career mark.

The coaches' relationship is one of mutual respect and admiration, but not always friendship.

The two have been known to exchange jibes via the media, and the Final Four was no exception.

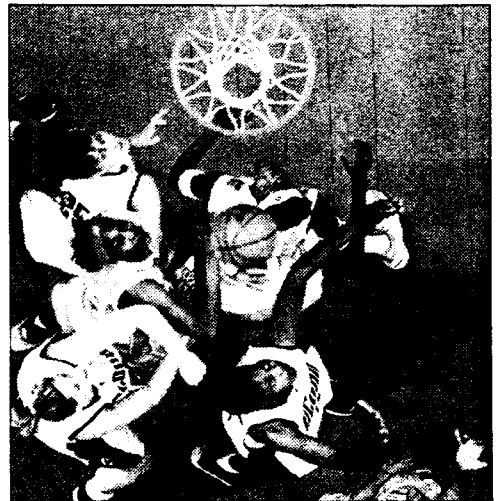
Perhaps their relationship, as well as the two programs, could be summed up while comparing cheesesteak establishments in Philadelphia.

In downtown Philadelphia, facing one another, are two stores named Pat's and Geno's.

"Pat's is old and beat up and dilapidated," Auriemma said with a grin.

"Geno's is bigger. Not that it means anything, don't get me wrong. You know, it's just things that come up. It's just one of those things."

Kind of like sports rivalries — especially between Tennessee and Connecticut.



Chris Gardner/Associated Press

Tennessee and Connecticut players battle.

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