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COLLEGE BASKETBALL

## UConn Wins the NCAA Men's Basketball Title

UConn beat San Diego State to win the school's fifth men's basketball championship.

*By Laine Higgins*

HOUSTON—Connecticut came into Monday night's NCAA men's championship team riding a run of blowout wins through March Madness, never having to sweat its survival. San Diego State entered with a penchant for last-second comebacks. Then they played a title game that seemed to offer both outcomes.

UConn jumped out to a 12-point first-half lead that it could never quite nail into place after the break, then watched the Aztecs claw their way back as this defensive-minded team seemed unwilling to play the fated role of double-digit loser.

But in the end, the Huskies' knack for pushing the pace and scoring in transition were too much for this physical San Diego State team that does best when it baits opponents into driving in the paint. In front of 70,000-strong at NRG Stadium, the No. 4 seeded Huskies pulled away from five-seed San Diego State 76-59, to deliver UConn its fifth championship in the last 25 years, the most of any Division I program.

“We’ve been striving for No. 5,” coach Dan Hurley said. “Now we’ve got our own!”

Even accounting for its second-half wobbles on Monday night, the win completed an extraordinary glide through the tournament for the Huskies. UConn won its six NCAA tournament games by an average margin of 20 points.

Winning games by large margins on the way to the title game has historically been a good indicator of an imminent championship. UConn became only the sixth team since the field expanded to 64 teams in 1985 to reach the title game while winning every round by double digits. Only one of those teams failed to cut down the nets: North Carolina in 2016, which lost to Villanova on an outrageous buzzer-beater.

It wasn’t as easy as it could or should have been against San Diego State, however. The Aztecs came into Monday’s championship as a team that prided itself on its defense. Twice during this tournament, the Aztecs ability to shut down opponents’ scoring ambitions enabled second-half comebacks—first in the Elite Eight against No. 6 Creighton and then in the semifinals against underdog Florida Atlantic, a nine-seed.

It looked initially as if a comeback wouldn’t be in order this time around—because for a while it seemed that a closer game might be in order.

The Huskies looked jittery to start, as the Aztecs raced to an early lead on red-hot 80% shooting. Coach Brian Dutcher’s defense was as advertised, denying UConn looks from deep and forcing them to settle for contested field goals.

San Diego State’s offense, however, was as anemic as its defense was hearty. The Aztecs struggled through a more than 11-minute scoring drought, during which San Diego State went 0 for 12 from the field as UConn went from trailing by four to leading by 15.

“They’re hard to score on,” Dutcher said. “Their length bothered us around the rim.”

Dutcher had said that the hardest thing to do in these situations is also the most important: stay patient. “I always tell the guy your biggest enemy is frustration, both individually and as a team,” he said. “Because if you’re frustrated, you’re not going to be able to play.”

True to form, Dutcher’s face did not become flushed when he summoned his team for a timeout about eight minutes into its scoring drought.

It wasn’t just that shots weren’t falling for the Aztecs; they weren’t taking care of the ball either. Again and again, a San Diego State player would drive into the paint under the basket and see the ball ripped away. By the end of the first half, UConn had scored

11 points off of turnovers and five more on fast-breaks.

“We are really dangerous because of the way we can explode in transition,” junior guard Andre Jackson Jr. had said on Sunday.

It was something of which Dutcher was well aware heading into Monday’s matchup. “Obviously we have to control them in transition. They’re as good a 3-point shooting team in transition that we’ve played all year,” the coach said.

The only hurdle UConn had to overcome in the first half was star guard Jordan Hawkins picking up two fouls and spending the last six minutes of the half on the bench. With its nine-man rotation, however, that mattered little to coach Dan Hurley. Transfer marksman Joey Calcaterra came into the game in his place and swished a huge 3-pointer that helped put UConn up 36-24 at the break. Just as Dutcher predicted, Calcaterra scored off of a pull-up in transition before San Diego State had a chance to set its defense.

In the second half, UConn continued to dictate the tempo and find buckets at ease. The Huskies parked one or both of their towering big men—6-foot-9 Adama Sanogo and 7-foot-2 Donovan Clingan—under the basket to put every Aztecs shot at risk of being swatted away.

After about 10 minutes of struggling to make a bucket, San Diego State rediscovered its groove on offense. Senior Jaedon LeDee got the rally going with back-to-back layups to narrow the lead to 11. The Aztecs then hit their next three shots—a 3-pointer and two UConn turnovers run back for field goals. Add in perfect free-throw shooting from senior Keshad Johnson and the deficit had shrunk to five points with a little over five minutes remaining.

“We knew that when we were down it wasn’t over with. We’ve been in that position many times this year,” sixth-year senior Adam Seiko said.

Then Hawkins drilled a 3-pointer and the Huskies never looked back.

“We ran into too good of a team, and we didn’t play at our best,” Dutcher said after the game. “They’re a reason for that... but we had to play better in order to have a chance to win the game.”

Banner No. 5 has been the Huskies’ elusive goal since Hurley was hired in 2018 amidst a dismal spell for the men’s team in Storrs, Conn. While the UConn women were winning ever more titles, the men missed two NCAA tournaments in a row. Every day, they walked past life-sized banners reminding them of the program’s glory days under Jim Calhoun, plus the 2014 title with coach Kevin Ollie.

Jackson Jr. cited the decor in the team's gym as a motivating factor, particularly during the January slump when the Huskies lost six of eight games in Big East play.

"It's great to look up at other people's accomplishments, but to live up to those standards and to do it for yourself, it feels awesome," Jackson Jr. said after the game. "That's my favorite part about this right here. When we go back and we go to practice we're going to have one of our own."

Until Monday night, Hurley was something of an underachiever within his own family. His father, Bobby Hurley Sr., won 26 New Jersey state championships with Jersey City's St. Anthony High School and is enshrined in the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. Older brother Bobby Hurley Jr. was an All American who helped Duke win back-to-back titles in 1991 and 1992 and was a NBA Draft lottery pick. He now is the head coach at Arizona State.

Dan Hurley was only a 1,000-point scorer at Seton Hall, perpetually in the shadow of his father and older brother—until now. He's the first Hurley to make the Final Four as a coach and, as of Monday night, the first to win the whole dang thing. The now retired Hurley patriarch has been on hand to watch his youngest through every round of the NCAA tournament; so has the Sun Devils coach since the Sweet 16.

"I'm probably not here if I didn't...have tough people that raised me like a tough older brother that prepared me for all the adversity you have to face in life and battle back from," Hurley said after the game.

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