TODAY


## WOMEN'S COLLEGE BASKETBALL|FINAL FOUR

## McDonald, Bueckers propel Arizona, UConn

## BY JIM VERTUNO

Associated Press
SAN ANTO SAN ANTONIO - One is
a freshman who stepped into a freshman who stepped into
the job of leading the most the job of leading the most
successful program in women's basketball. The other is senior who accepted the call to build one of the worst into one of this season's best. Together, UConn's Paige
Bueckers and Arizona's Aar McDonald are two of the mos dynamic scorers in the country heading into their Friday night clash in the women's
NCAA Tournament Final Four.
UConn won the River Walk region and rides into its 13th Bueckers this week becam the first freshman to win The Associated Press national player of the year award. The challenge for Bueck-
ers this season was learning ers this season was learning
how to lead a program that had already produced some of the game's greatest players - including Rebecca Lobo, Sue Bird, Diana Taurasi, Maya Moore and Breanna Stewart - in the Huskies' charge for a potential
Before the season began, UConn coach Geno Auriemma considered bringing her off the bench just to ease her into the role. Two weeks of watching Buecke" that idea "out the window," he said.
Bueckers led the Huskies (28-1) in scoring, assists and steals this season and scored 28 points in their $69-67$ regional final win over Baylor.
Auriemma this week called Bueckers "dominant" in "the
biggest games we played."
But she's still a freshman playing in her first Final Four at a program where winning it all is the annual demand. UConn hasn't made it to th 2016.' "Shes still a young kid who was playing against high school girls last year, so yeah, this is big. Nothing that I say
is gonna change the bigness of


UConn's Paige Bueckers drives past Baylor's DiJonai Carrington during the Elite Eight round of the women's NCAA Tournament Monday at the Alamodome in San Antonio.
t, Auriemma said. "Im sure heres a part of her that, you now, is anxious, nervous, all the things that you would be if you were her in a game ome way, she finds what all great players do. She finds that thing that she has inside of her hat very few people have, that allows to her to function in those big moments.
McDonald's burden was to build a winner at a program stuck in a basketball desert. Coach Adia Barnes put that ob on her as soon as McDonald transferred from Washing on in 2017 when the Wildcat

were living at the bottom of the Pac-12 McDonald sat out the 2017 2018 season and watched as Arizona won just six games. player of the year and has the Wildcats on level ground with the Huskies for at least one "It's crazy. We really started said. "Coach (Adia) Bald said. "Coach (Adia) Barnes
and the other coaches. They do a great job recruiting. The changed the culture since I've been here. My teammates have put in so much work and it's exciting to see it all pay off." the Mercado region as a No. 3 seed. McDonald has scored at least 31 points in each of the Wildcats previous two games. Against Indiana in the regional final, she twisted her left ankle with 2:35 left, exclamation on the win with a 3-point play. She said the ankle should be fine Friday night.
"Nobody thinks we can
win. We're the underdog win. We're the underdogs.
Wére going to play loose We're going to play loose and
free," McDonald said. free, McDonald said. ner advances to Sunday's final rizona's Aari McDonald react diana inking a basket against diana in the Elite Eight round of he women's NCAA Tourname other semifinal matchup between Stanford and South Carolina.

Back to the future
Auriemma and Barnes met in the 1998 women's NCAA the point guard led Arizon the point guard led Arizona
to the Sweet 16 , in what had been the school's deepest tou ney run. UConn won 74-57 but Auriemma remembers Barnes, who was the confer ence player of the year that matchup."
"You couldn't guard her with a guard, you couldn't guard her with a forward," has made women's basketball at Arizona supremely importfor the future who's having tremendous success in the present."

## Tough draw

UConn's Christyn Williams has the difficult job of defend quick bursts in her 5 -foot-6 frame to blow by defenders on drives into the lane or sneak through traffic for wide-open 3 -pointers. McDonald made five of six from long range grabbed 11 rebounds. "She's a great player, very quick, she can get to the basket, she can create space for herself", Williams said. "She’s andful."
Williams drew a simila assignment in the Sweet 1 Caitlin Clark, the nation's lead ing scorer, holding her to 21 points, six below her average

## History made

Arizona is the first women' team to make the Final Four fter missing the previous 10 likely would have made the ournament last season but it was canceled due to the coro navirus pandemic. Barnes is he sixth coach to lead their She also joins South Carolina’s Dawn Staley in the first time two Black women head coaches have made it to the national semifinals.


South Carolina coach Dawn Staley cuts down the net after the team's win over Texas in the Elite Eight round of the women's NCAA Tournament at the Alamodome in San Antonio on Tuesday.

## Final Four

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 Staley is "someone who is super competitive, whateverDawn decided to go into she was going to be at the top of whatever career she decided," VanDerveer said. "In law, poli tics, she has it, she's a very special person. I cheer for her every game except for the game
This inn't the first meeting between the two on the big stage. They played in the 2017 Final Four and South Carolina rallied from a nine-point halfthe NCAA championship "I asked our team why cant you execute what you want to execute?" Staley said. "One player raises their hand and was like 'because we're millen nials.' Really? That's the answe you have.
Broke it down huddled it and got into their lead and eventually ended up winning the game."
Some other things to look
for in Frid for in Friday nights matchup Stanford:

## Brink's health

Stanford freshman Cameron Brink injured her leg in the Cardinal's come-from-bethe Elite Eight. VanDerveer is expecting her to play Friday night.
"She's doing well so hopefully she'll be ready to play," VanDerveer said before prac tice Thursday. "Don't know
$100 \%$ the answer right now. She tweaked her leg a little bit. Hopefully its minor. We'll see.' In her place, Ashten Precht
scored all 16 of her points in the second half to help the Ca dinal rally to beat Louisville in the Elite Eight.

## Offense vs. defense

Stanford has been making 3-pointers at an impressive
rate, connecting on 50 of the in the first four games of the tournament. The Cardinal are fifth in the country in made 3 s and sixth in percentage at $38.3 \%$.
South Carolina has been
playing stellar defense includ playing stellar defense, includ-
ing shutting out Texas in the fourth quarter in their Elite Eight matchup. The Gamecocks blocked 14 shots in that game and held the Longhorns to just $23 \%$ shooting. South just 74 points per 100 posses sions in the women's NCAA Tournament so far, which only five teams have done over the past five years.

## Longevity

VanDerveer has been coach ing for 43 years, winning two national championships. Staaround the game that long. "For Tara and all the coaches who have dedicated their lives to growing the game and im-
pacting young people as they pacting young people as they
have they re doing it for all the right reasons,', Staley said. "There's no way a coach would stay in a profession they didnt reap some inner satisfaction
from."

