

# THE FINAL FOUR

PAIGE BUECKERS

## Bueckers' game, presence are must-see

◀ **BUECKERS** from C1

It's been this way since she was in sixth grade.

One of the best basketball coaches in the game happened to be walking by a gym that day. A random day, a random workout. Cheryl Reeve was at the fitness center and saw a little girl with a basketball.

Something about the way she carried herself, so cool and confident shooting baskets alone on a rec court, made the coach stand there and watch. Bueckers was 11 or 12 years old at the time. A middle-schooler with high-level basketball skills and a full reservoir of swagger. That part especially caught the eye of Reeve, championship coach of the Minnesota Lynx.

Bueckers' body language was so unusually self-assured that Reeve had to meet this precocious swash-buckler. The coach and the kid talked that day, as Reeve showed her a few things and put her through a few drills just for fun.

Reeve was incapable of knowing then that her initial impression would later become reality, that this little girl would become a transcendent force in women's basketball.

NBA players went to watch her play in high school.

Slam Magazine made her the first high schoolgirl to grace its cover.

After becoming the first college freshman to win National Player of the Year, she trademarked her nickname — "Paige Buckets" — and has now signed multiple endorsement deals with a combined reported value of \$1 million. Gatorade signed her as the first college athlete, male or female, to endorse their global brand.

Her talent and personality act as a gravitational pull with audiences who expect greatness and often are treated to something even better. Anyone who needed a reminder of Bueckers' skill and ability to dominate got just that Monday night.

She didn't just help guide UConn to its 14th consecutive Final Four appearance, she taught a master class in performing under pressure.

She scored 23 points after halftime — with only one missed shot — in a double-overtime thriller against North Carolina State in the regional final. She made all six free-throw attempts in overtime, so calm in that frenzied moment, it was as if she was shooting baskets alone in her driveway.

"Paige is different," UConn coach Geno Auriemma said.

Afterward, as UConn conducted a news conference, Auriemma tapped Bueckers on the shoulder and pointed to the stat sheet. He whispered something that made her smile. Then he crumpled the paper and playfully tossed it at her.

It was a silly moment between a Hall of Fame coach and superstar who realized something special had just happened. Her performance put a voltage spike into a Final Four that already promised to place Bueckers at center stage.

"It will be like, 'Shut down the streets because it's Paige Bueckers Day,'" former Hopkins coach Brian Cosgriff said. "I'm half-joking when I say that, but having gone through it when she was here, it's not a stretch of the imagination for something like that because everyone is talking about it."

Bueckers tried to downplay the emotion of playing in a Final Four in her hometown, but her reaction as the final seconds ticked off the clock in Bridgeport on Monday told otherwise. She skipped and danced around the court and then later admitted with a chuckle, "Being at home is nice too, so I'm not going to lie."

That level of attention and expectation of greatness is a lot to bear for someone still only 20 years old, but Bueckers appears completely at ease swimming laps in her fishbowl.

"Some people play the game, some people love the game," she said, "but I think I live the game."

### Ms. Buckets

Auriemma already owns a plaque in the Basketball Hall of Fame. At UConn, he has won 11 national championships, made 22 Final Four appearances and coached 26 All-Americans.

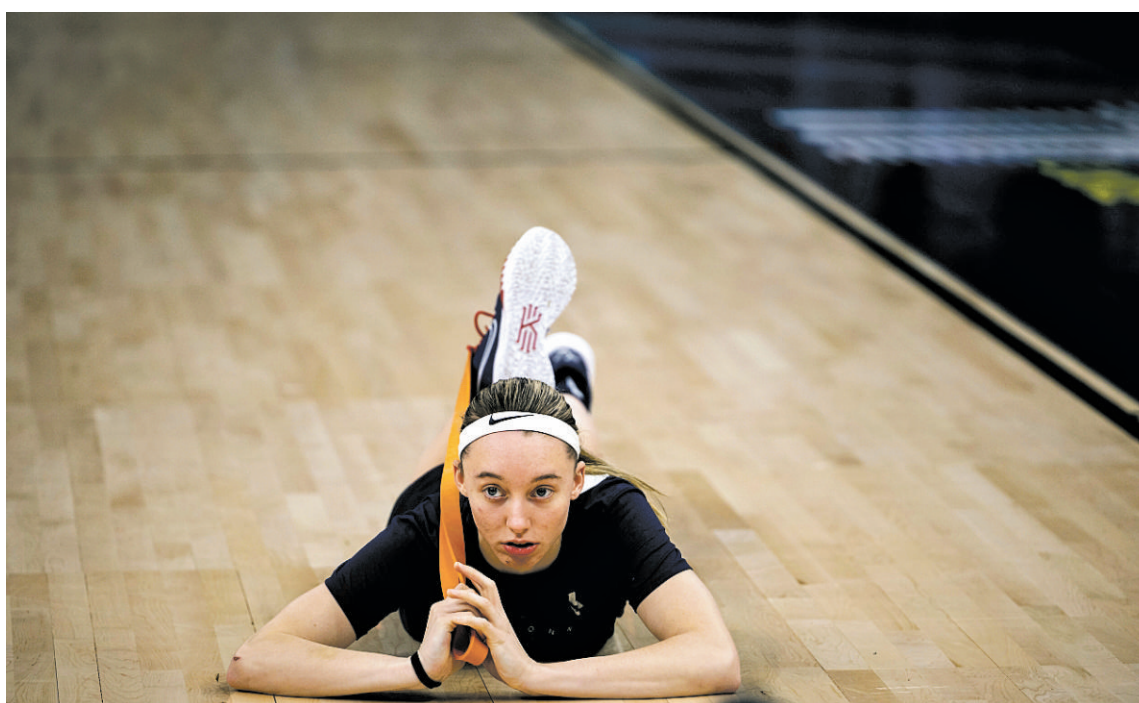
He doesn't make a habit of comparing star players of one era to another but on Monday night in a moment of euphoria, Auriemma allowed himself to take a few steps down that path. Diana Taurasi remains the gold standard in UConn lore, for now.



### ARRIVING ON A MISSION

Paige Bueckers arrived with her University of Connecticut teammates at the women's Final Four team hotel Tuesday in Minneapolis. Connecticut faces Stanford on Friday in a Final Four semifinal game.

Photo by CARLOS GONZALEZ • cgonzalez@startribune.com



### FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS

Bueckers, who starred at Hopkins High, stretched Thursday at Target Center. Last season's national player of the year at UConn, she suffered a serious knee injury early this season but has returned to help lift the Huskies.

Photo by ELIZABETH FLORES • liz.flores@startribune.com



### NEXT SHOT: SEMIFINALS

Bueckers practiced the shooting form that led UConn to a dramatic regional final victory on Monday. The Huskies face defending NCAA champion Stanford on Friday as they seek a 12th national championship.

Photo by CARLOS GONZALEZ • cgonzalez@startribune.com

"She has the qualities of a kid who loves the game like Diana does," Auriemma said. "And she thinks there's never been a better basketball player than her, even though she's humble enough to admit that she makes mistakes."

Bueckers does things on the court that few others are capable of, not because she is more physically gifted or freakishly athletic but by the power of instinct and guile. She sees the game differently. Her recognition of situations is one step ahead. She accentuates traits that cannot be coached.

The irony in her scoring takeover

against N.C. State is that shooting isn't even her best attribute, according to those who know her best. Former Hopkins teammate Amaya Battle puts vision and passing atop the list. Cosgriff always highlights her unselfishness.

"I'll say this until they put me six feet under," he said, "but Paige makes everyone around her better players."

A knee injury that sidelined her for 19 games this season forced UConn to find a new identity. Four of the team's five losses came during her absence. For Bueckers, two months without basketball was misery. The rehab, the isolation, the

inability to pick up a basketball and take a jump shot.

"It's kind of hard to fill the void when you're not even able to stand," she said.

She coped by consuming college and NBA basketball on TV, and spending time with teammates to avoid feeling lonely and detached from the team.

Auriemma cautioned his players not to expect Bueckers to save the day once she returned. He purposely managed expectations as she eased back into the lineup, believing that Bueckers would not feel completely back to normal this season.

Then she shot the lights out Monday night.

"Just finding a way to win," she said after playing 45 grueling minutes and scoring 27 points. "I want to win every game I play in. Whatever it takes to keep playing with this team, to keep playing with the coaching staff that we have, that's what I want to do."

### Millions: followers, dollars

She stood on stage in a black dress, holding a trophy in both hands, with many of the biggest names in the sports world in the audience staring back at her. Bueckers won an ESPY Award last summer as best female college athlete and what she said in accepting the honor revealed her conviction in wanting to make an impact beyond basketball.

Her speech focused on the need to provide better support and more recognition to Black athletes and women of color. Her words were gracious but powerful:

"With the life that I have now as a white woman who leads a Black-led sport and celebrated here, I want to shine a light on Black women. They don't get the media coverage that they deserve. They've given so much to this sport, the community and society as a whole and their value is undeniable."

The confluence of unique basketball talent and massive social media following provides Bueckers a platform to use her voice to raise awareness on societal issues. She participated in marches after George Floyd's murder and has championed racial equality in support of her younger brother who is biracial.

Bueckers belongs to a select group of athletes — only a handful — whose name recognition and social media reach give them earning potential in the six-figure range, or even higher. The passage of name, image and likeness legislation opened the door for college athletes to monetize their fame.

Bueckers signed with high-profile executive Lindsay Kagawa Colas of the powerful Wasserman agency. She also hired business manager Gregg Cascaes, whose client list includes his two nephews, NBA players Tyus and Tre Jones.

Sam Weber, an executive with a tech company called Opendorse that helps facilitate sponsorship deals for college athletes, said Bueckers is "setting a blueprint for what the elite college athlete can try to obtain with NIL." Those deals for Bueckers could make her a millionaire before she leaves college.

Cascaes said a "significant" number of companies approached Bueckers with endorsement opportunities. Her business team took a deliberate approach in identifying companies that aligned with her goals outside of basketball and made sense from a brand perspective. She signed endorsement deals with Gatorade, StockX and Cash App, with three more sponsorships in the works, according to Cascaes.

A fresh one came to light Thursday, when it was announced Bueckers has partnered with Chegg as a brand ambassador aiming to fight food insecurity for students.

"You could have gone down the list and say, 'Yeah, I'm going to take this, this, and this,' but that would have been a terrible strategy," Cascaes said. "If you would take 10, 15 deals and just go for the money grab, you would realize real fast how hard that is on you."

Bueckers advised her management team that her focus in March is on basketball, not business. She didn't want anything to interfere with her pursuit of a national title. But her legacy in college will include being at the forefront of the NIL movement, especially for women athletes.

"Women's basketball is doing really well in that regard, just with the opportunities we're given and the chances we're getting in the field," she said. "I think that's really important for the growth of our game."

That growth will be on display this weekend at Target Center. Signs of progress in women's basketball will be everywhere at the Final Four and throughout Minneapolis.

The Grand Marshal of the festivities will feel at home because this is her home. And just like that day when a chance encounter caused a WNBA coach to stop and admire a little girl shooting jumpers, fans will show up or tune in and lock in on that No. 5 Connecticut jersey. To see what Paige Bueckers does next.

*"Some people play the game, some people love the game, but I think I live the game."*

UConn sophomore Paige Bueckers