

# Bird at the Buzzer

UConn, Notre Dame, and a Women's Basketball Classic

JEFF GOLDBERG | FOREWORD BY DORIS BURKE



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UConn, Notre Dame, and a  
Women's Basketball Classic

**Jeff Goldberg** Foreword by Doris Burke



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## **Bird at the Buzzer**

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For Susan, who always believed in me,  
especially when I didn't.

## **Contents**

Foreword . . ix

Acknowledgments . . xi

Introduction . . xv

**1.** Tip-Off . . 1

**2.** First Half . . 101

**3.** Second Half . . 169

**4.** Overtime . . 247

Epilogue . . 279

## Foreword

Watching the game of women's basketball continue to grow and gain respect in the American sports landscape has been one of the most enjoyable parts of my job as a color analyst, calling games for ESPN. Along the way, inevitably, certain moments in time have stood out, not only because of the quality of a particular game, but because they have been defining moments in the sport's history.

There have been many cases over the years where a women's basketball matchup has garnered its fair share of the media spotlight *prior* to the game. In that spotlight, the sport has not always lived up to its potential. But in the pages that follow, Jeff Goldberg, longtime UConn women's beat writer for the *Hartford Courant*, captures a night that delivered in a big way. With the exception of the members of the UConn program, no one had a better seat or was more familiar with the team than Goldberg, who not only understands the nuances of this particular season and this particular edition of the team, but also has a thorough knowledge of the program as a whole.

The electricity inside Gampel Pavilion that night was palpable. Even almost three hours before tip time, peo-

ple sensed that it was going to be a special night. The media was milling about. Everyone seemed to be wondering, could the Irish, who had already beaten the mighty Huskies in a matchup in South Bend earlier in the year, deliver the ultimate insult and beat UConn on its home floor?

Certainly, on paper, UConn was the more talented team. But, before the night was over, they would endure the heartbreaking loss of Shea Ralph, a player whose heart and guts could drive a team.

But just as the UConn program has marched on steadily since the arrival of Coach Geno Auriemma, so, too, the Huskies marched on that night. The game ended as it should, with a game-winner at the buzzer. I will leave the explanation of how things got to that point in the very capable hands of Mr. Goldberg. On this night, Sue Bird and women's basketball delivered.

*Doris Burke*



## Acknowledgments

I would like to offer my deepest appreciation and thanks to Rob Taylor at the University of Nebraska Press for believing in this topic and guiding me on my first-ever book project. His advice and counsel along the way proved invaluable, as did the cooperation of UNP's Courtney Ochsner, Sara Springsteen, and copy editor Beth Ina.

I met Barbara Collins Rosenberg in the summer of 2008, at a book-signing party for her clients Mike Lowell and Rob Bradford. Lowell, the Red Sox third baseman and 2007 World Series MVP, and Bradford, an accomplished baseball author and good friend of mine from the Red Sox beat, had just collaborated on Lowell's autobiography, *Deep Drive*.

Barbara gave me her card and told me to call if I ever had a book project of my own. In March 2009, I took her up on the offer, and *Bird at the Buzzer* was born. Not bad, Barbara, for a Yankees fan.

Once the project became official, it was time to track down the players and coaches who made the 2001 Big East final the greatest women's game ever played. That meant weeks and months of coordination with UConn, Notre Dame, and the WNBA to line up interviews. So a special thank you goes to Notre Dame Assistant Sports In-

formation Director Chris Masters and Senior Staff Assistant Carol Copley, as well as their counterparts at UConn: Associate Director of Athletics/Communications Mike Enright, Assistant Director Randy Press, and Program Aide Sarah Darras.

In the WNBA, thanks go out to Connecticut Sun Media Relations Manager Bill Tavares and Phoenix Mercury Communications Manager Eric Barkyoub.

Of course, if not for the insight and memories of the participants, this project would have gone nowhere. The players and coaches who offered their time and patience are owed an enormous debt of gratitude: at UConn, Geno Auriemma, Sue Bird, Diana Taurasi, Shea Ralph, and trainer Rosemary Ragle; at Notre Dame, Muffet McGraw and Ruth Riley. A special thank you goes to Niele Ivey, who was particularly generous with her time.

Also generous, particularly given her hectic travel schedule, was ESPN's Doris Burke, who called the 2001 Big East final along with Robin Roberts and graciously accepted my request to provide the book's foreword.

Although I covered the 2001 Big East final for the *Chicago Tribune*, it was my twenty-three years at the *Hartford Courant* that enabled me to conceive and complete this project. From 2001–6, I was the UConn women's beat writer, after having spent the previous four seasons as the *Courant's* online UConn columnist; with these positions came the access to the women's program that ultimately served as the foundation for this book. I am for-

ever grateful to my mentors at the *Courant*: Sports Editor Jeff Otterbein, Assistant Editors Jeff Smith and Scott Powers, Web Editors Chris Morrill and Gary Duchane, and fellow UConn writers Lori Riley and John Altavilla.

Not everything in this book is the product of the written word. The illustrations are largely the work of *Hartford Courant* photographers Michael McAndrews and Jay L. Clendenin, and a thank you goes to *Courant* Photo Editor John Scanlan, Archivist Rosa Ciccio, and Permissions Administrator Lynne Maston for providing the visual elements.

But the *Courant* colleague who meant—and means—the most to me is my best friend and former UConn men's and women's beat writer Matt Eagan, who provided keen insights about the 2001 season and was a source of support and advice throughout the writing process.

Following my five years on the UConn beat, I moved to covering the Boston Red Sox in 2007 and 2008. I've formed numerous friendships on the Sox beat, but two friends stand out the most, in part because their own book projects made them invaluable sources of advice as I made my way through the process. A big thank you goes to the aforementioned Rob Bradford of WEEL.com and MLB.com's Ian Browne.

A special thank you goes to my parents, Bob and Carole, for providing guidance—and occasional lodging in Connecticut—during the process.

But ultimately, none of this would have been possible

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

without the love and support of Susan Dellio, who inspired me to take an idea that had been kicking around in my head for eight years and finally make it a reality, encouraging me every step of the way. No wonder I decided to marry her.

# Introduction

**Storrs, Connecticut, January 16, 2010**

The giant red bus sat parked across the street from Gampel Pavilion, the ten-thousand-seat domed stadium and home of the University of Connecticut Huskies basketball teams. Sporting the larger-than-life-sized faces of studio hosts on its side, the *ESPN GameDay* bus stood sentry for the historic show taking place inside the concrete edifice on this chilly Saturday night.

Although classes at UConn were not yet back in session, the student section of the arena was filled to capacity, the students chanting and bouncing up and down in unison, nonstop, as the game went on in front of them, exhorting their Huskies to victory.

At center court, flanked on both ends by a vast media contingent—carefully crafting words of description for this extraordinary night of basketball—were ESPN's top broadcast crew of Dan Shulman, Doris Burke, and the iconic college hoops carnival barker Dick Vitale.

It was a scene normally reserved for the men's games at UConn. But after a decade of dominance by Geno Auriemma and his top-ranked women's program, ESPN chose this night, a contest against third-ranked Notre Dame, on which to make basketball history.

For the first time ever, *ESPN GameDay*, the network's franchise Saturday college road show, was setting up shop for a women's game, kicking off its 2010 schedule in Storrs. Vitale, the manic, Hall of Fame voice of the men's game, would be calling a women's contest for the first time in his thirty-year broadcast career. Even the regulars in the student section, normally full only for the men's games, put on their Saturday best, not only filling the seats but doing so in white T-shirts adorned with a caricature of Auriemma on the front.

And UConn, in the midst of shattering its own Division I women's record of seventy consecutive victories, set between 2001 and 2003, did not disappoint the sellout crowd, taking the heart out of Notre Dame in the game's opening minutes, sprinting to an early 17-2 lead and never looking back in the course of a 70-46 victory.

As is so often the case in the women's game—and especially when one of the combatants is the overdog Huskies—the game itself did not live up to the hype that preceded it. But nearly a decade earlier, on a snowy March night in 2001, UConn and Notre Dame met inside this very arena with even more hype and more at stake. And when Sue Bird ended a thrilling and heart-wrenching game with a full-court dash and basket at the buzzer—giving UConn a 78-76 victory and the Big East Tournament title—ESPN made basketball history yet again, replaying the contest five nights later as the first-ever women's "Instant Classic."

And what a classic it was, a battle between No. 1 and

No. 2, featuring five future Olympians and eight WNBA first-round picks, the middle game of a three-round heavy-weight fight that helped decide the 2001 NCAA women's national champion.

For Connecticut, the triumph would be backlit by tragedy. For Notre Dame, the defeat would point the team toward ultimate victory. For women's basketball, these forty minutes would show the world a sport at its highest level.

I covered the 2001 Big East women's final for the *Chicago Tribune*, the sister paper of my employer from 1985 to 2008, the *Hartford Courant*. The game was an intense roller coaster of emotion and great plays by the best players on the two best teams in the nation.

Epic games of this magnitude almost never happened on the women's side, so much so that I said to my *Courant* colleague and friend Matt Eagan in the parking lot outside Gampel Pavilion, just three hours after the game had ended, "I think we just witnessed the greatest women's game ever played."

Ten years later, the pronouncement still holds up.

The sport of women's basketball has continued to grow and evolve since 2001, with UConn starting a new decade with the first repeat undefeated seasons in the sport's history, going 39-0 in 2010 to capture a second consecutive title, the seventh in Auriemma's UConn career. By the time the tenth anniversary of the 2001 Big East Tournament final is played, the Huskies will most likely have broken the UCLA men's eighty-eight-game

winning streak to claim the greatest run in the history of college basketball.

But for all the advances that would later come to the sport, the game played on the night of March 6, 2001, remains a singular, shining moment. If women's basketball lacks anything in 2010, it is a sense of its own mythology. So determined are the passionate and loyal caretakers of the sport to further advance it into the future that there has been precious little focus placed on its glorious past.

While all the other major American sports wax poetic about their respective Greatest Games—from the 1958 NFL Championship to Game 6 of the 1975 World Series to the 1992 Duke–Kentucky men's regional final—women's basketball has not yet afforded itself the time to reflect on the legacies left in its wake as it moves toward national acceptance.

This book seeks to shed light on the past, to acknowledge and expand on a seminal moment in the game's proud progression. The 2001 Big East final was a harmonic convergence of talent, circumstance, drama, and interest the likes of which the women's game had not seen before and has not discovered since.

Coming four months before a historic TV contract renewal with ESPN and a season before the start of the first UConn dynasty of the decade, the game was a right-time, right-place moment for women's basketball. This is the story of that time and place.



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