

Arizona holds off UConn in Storrs, 71-67

Written by Sean Murawski // SM Sports

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STORRS, CT— Many people in the college basketball media landscape believed the winner of this game in Storrs could very well be crowned the sport's best team in this very young season by the final buzzer.

On Monday November 24th, SM Sports will almost certainly be giving advantage to Arizona, who went into a rowdy, hydrated Gampel Pavilion and took down UConn, 71-67.

Tommy Lloyd's Arizona team has impressed so far, defeating defending champions Florida on opening night and UCLA a week later. They added to that stacked team sheet on Wednesday by defeating the third ranked Huskies.

Connecticut was dealt a blow just over an hour before tip off, as they learned their star center, leading scorer, and best player Tarris Redd Jr. would be sidelined with an ankle injury. This meant German freshman Eric Reibe would have the tall task of dealing with one of the country's best freshmen, Koa Peat.

Peat (16 pts, 12 rebs) was once again his usual self. Peat is a physical, athletic presence. UConn sent help and doubles every once in a while, but it was up to Reibe, Alex Karaban, and Dwayne Koroma to share the duty of deciphering his game. He rebounded well— a story UConn will lament all too much— and gave his team plenty of second chance opportunities.

By the 3:30 mark in the first half, there had been five ties and eight lead changes. Both teams went into the half with some foul trouble. Silas Demary Jr. (13 pts, 6-10 FG) led the backcourt for UConn, and Reibe (15 pts, 4 rebs, 2-5 3pt) had done his best to deputize down low. It was hard to believe while watching, but UConn was only down two points at the break.

The second half solidified Arizona's dominance for good, as it felt UConn was playing catch up the rest of the way. The story was Jaden Bradley (21 pts, 3 rebs, 2 ast) who is just a true shotmaker. He is a potent driver and was able to carve up UConn's

defense, who seems once again prone to jumping on pump fakes and foul trouble, just like last season.

Helped on by Bradley, Arizona jumped to an 11 point lead, which was cut down to eight points by the under 12 timeout. Arizona came out hot to start the second half, going 8-13 from the field by this point. Alex Karaban, who scored just 8 points on 2-5 shooting, hit a huge three to make it a one point game just before the final media timeout. That was part of a 17-5 run for UConn, who had been cold all night but began to streak.

It ended up back and forth in the final minutes, with missed buckets, rebounds, and traded points between the teams. Malachi Smith hit a mid range jumper to give UConn a two point lead, before Motiejus Krivas grabbed an offensive board and laid it back in to give Arizona the lead a minute later.

In the end, it was Jaden Bradley who played Arizona's closer. His crafty layup with under 15 seconds left made it a three point lead, which increased to four through foul shots and the usual end of game flow. Bradley's layup ended up being a major difference, as the buzzer sounded for a four point Arizona victory.

Arizona's dedication in this game was admirable. At one point up double digits, UConn fought back, but Arizona took the punches. Ironically, it is Arizona's own punch—the one/two of Bradley/Peat—that hit back hardest. Bradley's relentless shotmaking paired with Peat's strength down low makes them one of the most dynamic duos across the country. Arizona for sure has a claim to be the country's best team by the time polls refresh next week, and who is going to argue?

UConn can take some solace that, despite missing both Reed and five-star freshman Braylon Mullins to injury, they kept it close with arguably the best team in college ball. Of course, there is also concern that SM preseason 3rd team All-American Solo Ball (14 pts, 1-8 3pt) is still incredibly cold from beyond the arc. His mid range game helped UConn get back in it, showing progress from last season. However, if UConn is to go deep again this year, Ball and Karaban will essentially always need to be on point. The rebounding margin was astounding— Arizona 43, UConn 23. While Tarris Reed Jr. for sure would have been a worthy matchup against Koa Peat, he was not there. Eric Reibe showed he is ahead of schedule, but there was a clear difference in freshman tiers in the paint.

Arizona went into the home of perhaps the country's best program and took them down. UConn, while hobbled, fought admirably, but there is no denying Arizona's

national prowess. Of all the games so far this season, tonight's game felt the most like a Final Four preview.

It is never too early to look forward to March, and if the NCAA tournament began today, Arizona has proven that they would be the team to beat.

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