

MEET UCONN'S NEXT SUPERSTAR

National Player of the Year Paige Bueckers Point guard's plan is 'to win four' national titles No. 1 recruit intent on being best player ever rather than Huskies' savior

BY ROGER CLEAVELAND

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She has been cast as the savior of a UConn women's basketball dynasty that doesn't actually need saving.

She's also been universally honored as the best girls high school player in the country and has been heralded by Huskies coach Geno Auriemma as the reason UConn will win next year's national championship.

That's an awful lot to put on the shoulders of an 18-year-old kid, but 5-foot-11 point guard Paige Bueckers (pronounced Beckers) from Eden Prairie, Minn. gives you the impression that she has everything in the proper perspective.

She's ready to join UConn's transcendent players such as Rebecca Lobo, Diana Taurasi, Maya Moore and Breanna Stewart. And like Stewart did, she is coming to Storrs expecting to win four national championships.

"(Stewart) was just saying what everybody else was thinking, and I think the same thing. I've never

planned on losing," Bueckers said. "I've never said I think we might win two or one national championship.

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PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY CRISSHA WALTON

UConn: Nation's top player Bueckers embraces Huskies

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My plan is to win four.

"Everyone wants to go to college and win four national championships. But that is why I went to UConn. I know their program has done it before, and I know with the tools they have, it is very possible."

If you judge her as some cocky young kid based on the confidence she has in herself, Auriemma and the UConn tradition then you're egregiously miscasting her. She's a complex, mature person with layers of personality and talent.

She said that if she were to send a message to herself in the future it would be to stay true to who she is and

and comes here with something to prove.

"The fact people are saying the dynasty is over and that UConn is no longer the team to beat, and UConn is not as good as they were definitely makes me mad," Bueckers said. "They had three losses all to teams in the top 5. It is crazy that people have lost respect that soon. If it was any other program, it would be considered a great year. For UConn the standard is set so high, but that is what I love about them. It gets me excited. I love playing under pressure and having a target on my back."

She doesn't, however, like being called the savior.

"I try not to pay attention too much to that stuff, because no one person can save a basketball program,"

always be the 18-yearold version of herself.

“My best trait is that I’m really selfless,” Bueckers said. “I have always cared about other people and put others before myself. I just never want that to change. I am a huge person of faith so I never want to lose that relationship, and I have always been a person who cares about other people and seeing them succeed.”

Her Hopkins High School team didn’t lose her last two seasons, and her senior season she averaged 21.4 points, 9.4 assists, 5.0 rebounds and 5.4 steals per game to lead the Royals (30-0) to the top spot in the espnW Top 25 Power Rankings.

“I always tell people, ‘You might be a better defender than me. You might be a better shooter than me. You might be a better finisher than me, but you will never be a better passer than me,’” Bueckers said. “I also take pride in my I.Q. and my ability to make my teammates and those around me better. I am a pretty good shooter and a pretty good finisher. I am a good dribbler, but I will always take pride in my passing first.”

Her unselfish team play makes her a perfect fit for UConn. She committed here because she loves the family atmosphere, embraces how hard Auriemma pushes players to get the most out of their ability and she loves the winning tradition.

She also loves playing with a chip on her shoulder,

Bueckers said. “It is going to be because of what coach and the whole coaching staff and the whole team does that we will have a successful year. It won’t just be because of me. I am not going to take credit for being a savior or anything like that.”

She may, however, be just what the team needs. UConn’s great teams have been built around very confident, unselfish playmakers with the desire and ability to step up in clutch moments.

Auriemma has built up high-profile recruits in the past only to dial back his praise and expose their weaknesses once they get on campus. This season he was asked would he would say about her as a freshman, and he responded, “I’ll say she is the reason we won this national championship.”

“It is a really big compliment, because every time Coach Geno speaks it is words of wisdom, and I believe everything he says,” Bueckers said. “I trust him. I know he trusts me, and that is why he said it. It just makes our relationship stronger. He told me that pressure is only a real thing when you are asked to do something you can’t do. I know when I am under him and with the whole coaching staff and my teammates that we can accomplish great things. I know we can win a national championship. So it is really no pressure.”