

DYNASTY

Michael Stanton | February 22, 2018 | UConn
Photos by Steven G. Smith

The Huskies run the play again. This time, they whip the ball around the perimeter until a seam opens in the defense. Then Napheesa Collier drives to the basket and puts up a shot that caroms off the rim, and 6-foot-6 Azura Stevens swoops in to grab the rebound and score. “Good, good, good,” says Auriemma. Practice is brisk and businesslike this October afternoon. Where others see a nice play, like Crystal Dangerfield’s intercepting a pass and tipping it out of bounds, Auriemma sees a flaw in the diamond he is polishing.

“That’s the worst play in the world,” he tells them. “She tips the ball out of bounds, and you’re clapping instead of trying to save it.”

The thing about playing for UConn is that you’re always playing for—and against—the legacy of players who came before you. So when Kyla Irwin fails to rotate quickly enough to defend a shot, Auriemma invokes the memory of Breanna Stewart, who won four national titles and was the WNBA’s No. 1 draft pick in 2016. “Stewie could be late—she’d block the guy’s shot,” says Auriemma. “You can’t be late. You gotta be early.”

Auriemma points to his veterans, then delivers a message to his younger players. “You don’t know half the stuff they know,” he says, substituting another word for stuff. “Work hard. This is your chance. Know where people are. Practice paying attention.” So it goes in the UConn incubator, which in Auriemma’s first 32 seasons produced 11 national titles, six undefeated seasons, and 18 Final Fours, including the past 10 in a row. As he prepared for this, his 33rd season, he was closing in on 1,000 wins. If legendary UCLA men’s coach John Wooden was the Wizard of Westwood, Auriemma, who in 2016 surpassed Wooden’s 10 national titles, is the Sultan of Storrs. Freshman Megan Walker was the nation’s high school player of the year, but in Storrs all she has to do is look up at the banners of All-Americans on the walls to know her place.

“When you walk in and see all those banners, you know you’re really here,” she says. “We’re not playing for ourselves—we’re playing for the seniors. The intensity level can be rough to get used to. But Coach says big-time players perform on the big stage.” Taking in practice this day is veteran WNBA coach Dan Hughes, who has just been hired to coach

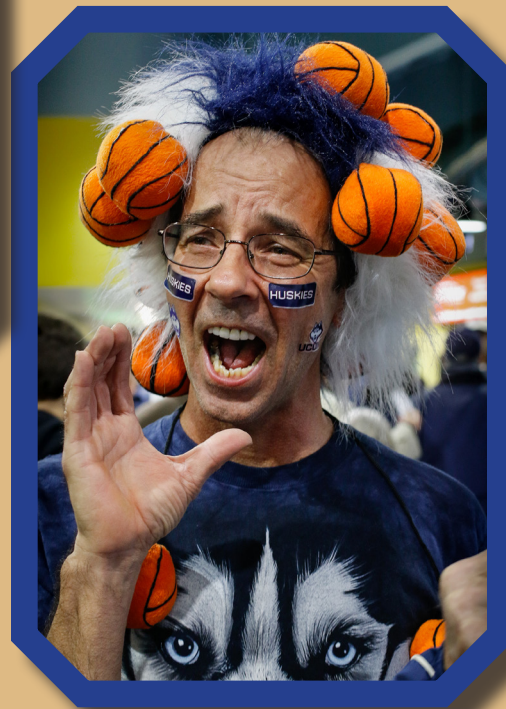
a Seattle Storm team that includes three former Auriemma players: Stewart, Sue Bird, and Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis.

People who see Auriemma only as an acerbic coach who pushes his players’ buttons overlook the fact that he is “a master teacher,” says Hughes. “When you build a team, you try to get players to give energy rather than take it,” says Hughes. “UConn players give you energy. I wish I had 10 of them.” Hughes points to the Huskies’ silent attentiveness as Auriemma speaks. “He’s like a musician. He uses the pauses and silence in the music.”

The little white bus trundles through a gray November afternoon, the thinning light a harbinger of the winter that will soon wrap itself around the hills of eastern Connecticut. Nineteen residents of the Covenant Village retirement community in Cromwell peer out the bus windows at the timeless landscape: a sagging farmhouse, stone walls tinged with lichen, a red barn, horses in stubbled fields.

Sitting up front is Covenant Village resident Jack Reisch, who directs the driver to turn onto Discovery Drive. A small city emerges from the countryside—a bustling campus with more than 19,000 undergraduates on land that Charles and Augustus Storrs donated in 1880 for the purpose of educating boys in farming. Rising like a bulbous white mushroom is the bus’s destination: Gampel Pavilion, home to one of the unlikeliest dynasties in all of sports. One of the many fan clubs that have sprung up across Connecticut to celebrate the UConn women’s basketball team, the retirement home group calls itself “Chris’s Kids.” When the group formed in 1995, the year the Huskies won their first national championship, the residents had a naming contest and chose “Geno’s Bambinos.” But they became Chris’s Kids after a club leader traded emails with associate head coach Chris Dailey, who later came for a visit. Reisch has organized this trip for Chris’s Kids to see the women in their final tune-up for another season of high expectations, an exhibition game against defending Division II national champion Ashland University. For most of the women’s games, the club members park themselves in front of the big-screen television in Covenant Village’s events room, decked out in Husky blue and white.

From cradle to grave, Connecticut is mad about its Huskies. Girls grow up in



Connecticut with the same basketball fever as boys in Indiana. They dream of being Diana Taurasi or Maya Moore or Breanna Stewart or Katie Lou Samuelson, whose hair bun and three-point shot little girls try to emulate. Before the rise of regional sports television networks and UConn's subsequent move to the SNY network, which reaches 14 million viewers in the Northeast, the UConn women were the top-rated show on Connecticut Public Television.

Obituaries in Connecticut newspapers are filled with references to the dearly departed's devotion to Huskies hoops. "My late mother, a devout Catholic and by no means a sports fan, relished the experiences of the women's team," one man wrote the Hartford Courant last winter, as the team was in the midst of a mind-boggling 111-game winning streak. "In her later years ... her comfort came from the religious network, but her joy was manifest in the accomplishments of these gifted women...."

When the Huskies were upset last year by Mississippi State on the verge of their fifth straight championship, their fans were shocked. "I remember the tears," says Chris's Kids member Ron Gocht. But Betty Metcalf, an 88-year-old Covenant Village resident who works part-time as a grief counselor, said her disappointment mingled with relief. "I knew they had to lose sometime, and it was worrying," she confesses.

Barricades block the street outside Gampel. Reisch negotiates with a police officer to let the bus unload near the entrance. "We've got a 103-year-old lady on board!" he shouts. That does the trick. Chris's Kids clamber off the bus. Esther MacSwan, who is indeed 103, glides into the arena with the aid of a red walker; flanking her is Louise Butts, who is 88 and, in the wake of a recent hip surgery, also uses a walker. The two settle in at center court in one of Gampel's hand-capped-seating areas, which sell out quickly for women's games. MacSwan takes in the scene: the blaring music, the parents with little girls in UConn jerseys, the cheers as the players are introduced. Hanging from the

ceiling are the women's national championship banners: 1995, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016.

MacSwan has followed the Huskies for 27 years, since moving to Covenant Village in 1990, but this is her first visit to Gampel. When she was born, in 1914, women were not yet allowed to vote, let alone fast-break. When Stanford University played the University of California at Berkeley in the first women's intercollegiate game, in 1896, women guarded the doors to bar male spectators.

"her joy was manifest in the accomplishments of these gifted women..."

But even that was considered too risqué, and three years later both schools banned women's basketball from intercollegiate competition. For older women, the success of the UConn women's team has been liberating. For girls, empowering. For the state of Connecticut, sandwiched between Boston and New York without a major professional sports franchise of its own, a source of pride. And for basketball fans young and old, male as well as female, just plain exhilarating—not only because the women win but also because of how they play.

"I was never much for girls' sports, but then I went to a game and had so much fun," says Chris's Kids member John Sandberg. Watching them play—the passing, the unselfishness—"it's like an art exhibit. Such beautiful movement."

Success was not a foregone conclusion when a young, brash Geno Auriemma arrived in Storrs in 1985. After four years as an assistant coach at the University of Virginia, Auriemma found himself driving past barns and rolling fields. (One city recruit saw the pastoral landscape and said she couldn't play at a place that had cows.)

The team played in a barnlike field house with a leaky roof. When it

rained during practice, the coaches put buckets out to catch the water and the players dribbled around them. Auriemma shouted instructions over the music blasted by the weight lifters in one corner of the gym. Practices were punctuated by the crashing of hurdles being knocked over by members of the track team running around an oval that ringed the court; one day, an exasperated Chris Dailey asked them if the object wasn't to jump over the hurdles.

The team was lucky if the games attracted 50 people—mostly relatives, friends, and boyfriends. Program assistant Peggy Myers, who was the center and captain of Auriemma's first team, laughs when she describes fans telling her they were there "from the beginning." Myers (née Walsh, before marrying a former UConn football player) was a senior on a team that had gone 9–18, 9–20, and 9–18 in her first three years. She was surprised when Auriemma called to introduce himself, because the search committee had said it wanted to hire a woman for head coach. When she met him, her first impression was: "He's a little guy." But she adds, "He was the same cocky, arrogant, great, fun-loving guy he is today."

Myers had the top bunk in her room, but after the first two weeks of practice she was so exhausted that she pulled the mattress onto the floor to sleep. Shortly before the season opener, Auriemma told her that he was thinking of starting another player who practiced harder. "I was in tears," recalls Myers, who intensified her efforts and wound up starting every game that season. "He elevated my game." That team finished 12–15, Auriemma's only losing season. But it flashed a new competitive fire, and Auriemma and Dailey began recruiting more talented players. Then, in January 1990, UConn opened the shiny Gampel Pavilion. Intended primarily as a showcase for the popular men's basketball team, which Jim Calhoun was building into a powerhouse that itself would win four national championships, Gampel also became the women's new home.

Myers recalls Auriemma standing with her husband, Norm, in the empty 10,167-seat arena and predicting, "I'm gonna fill this up." Norm replied, "Are you nuts?" Looking back on that same moment, Auriemma chuckles. "What was it Oscar Wilde said? 'I'm not young enough to know everything about everything'? So back in that age, I used to just make stuff up. And there was this part of me that thought, yeah, we're gonna be really, really good and lots of people are gonna come watch us play. Wishful thinking?"

Yet the fans did start coming. At first it was because they couldn't get tickets to the men's games but still wanted to see the new arena. "I remember Laura Lishness stretching before one game and the place was packed, and she said, 'What are they doing?'" says Dailey. "I said, 'They're here for your game.' I didn't tell her they were just coming to look at the building, and that our games were free. But we had a good team and good personalities, and after the games the players would meet with the fans. It became a good connection. That started the phenomenon of what became UConn women's basketball." The next year, 1991, the team went to its first Final Four. That group, including Lishness and Kerry Bascom, was an early link in what has become a succession of talented players building on their forebears' victories.

That initial success led Auriemma to his first big star, Rebecca Lobo, who helped lift the UConn women to their first national championship, in 1995. Lobo received so much fan mail that Auriemma hired Myers, who had just given birth to her first child, to help answer it. Today Myers answers the phone, greets visitors, offers advice to players, and happily talks to recruits and their parents about what it's like to be a part of the basketball family.

The UConn women won their second national title in 2000, then embarked on a remarkable run of three



straight titles from 2002 to 2004. Auriemma calls the 39–0 team in 2002 his greatest, featuring Sue Bird, Swin Cash, Tamika Williams, Asjha Jones, and a precocious sophomore who would become UConn’s biggest star, Diana Taurasi. In Taurasi’s senior year, they ran their winning streak to 70 straight. At the time, Auriemma said the team would have loved to have broken UCLA’s record 88-game winning streak under John Wooden—but he doubted that would ever happen, given the growing parity in women’s college basketball.

He was proved wrong in 2010, when UConn broke UCLA’s mark with a 90-game winning streak, then topped that by ripping off 111 straight wins from 2014 to 2017. The two streaks marked an unparalleled stretch of dominance that saw six more national titles, including four straight from 2013 to 2016. Last season, in what was supposed to be a “down” year after the loss of the top three players chosen in the WNBA draft—Breanna Stewart, Morgan Tuck, and Moriah Jefferson—his players still charged into the Final Four unbeaten before the loss to Mississippi State.

So how have the Huskies maintained such dominance? “We’ve still been able to do what we do because that’s what we do,” Auriemma says. “That’s the best way I can explain it: That’s what we do.” Chris Dailey sits in her office on a quiet preseason morning last October, talking about the challenge of managing success. Long overshadowed by the outspoken Auriemma, Dailey—or “CD,” as she is known—has won her due as an essential part of the program’s success. She is yin to Auriemma’s yang, Bacall to his Bogie. A creature of habit, Dailey stops at the same Panera Bread in Manchester every morning to pick up a tall iced tea. When she went in about six weeks after the Mississippi State loss, the manager looked at her, tilted his head, and said, “Nice year.”

“I went up to him,” Dailey recalls, “and said, ‘We need to talk about that. 36–1 is an awesome year. It’s way better than nice, so let’s



come up with some other adjectives. Let me hear it.’ So he’s like, ‘Awesome!’ and ‘Great!’ “Let’s enjoy the fun they’re having, the way they play, the fact that they’re graduating and coming together as a team,” Dailey continues. “It’s not just about whether we win the national championship. Clearly we’ve created this ... but I want them to be in reality. What we’ve done is not reality.”

Dailey hears from women who played for UConn when the university had only a club team and who take special pride in the program’s success. “They celebrate the opportunities that women get today. That’s a gift for them,” Dailey says. “We talk about it with our players now. They wouldn’t have had the opportunities they have if Laura Lishness, Kerry Bascom, Meghan Pattyson, and others didn’t set the table for them. We try to teach our players the history of women’s basketball, so that they can appreciate and understand that they have a responsibility for future players.”

Maintaining success requires constant adaptation. The women practice against men, follow diverse workouts to maximize endurance, and drink shakes with slow-releasing carbohydrates to boost energy before a game. To help forge strong team bonds, players sign off of social media for the season when practice begins; this season, Dailey is having them deposit their cellphones in a box before practice, which they won’t get back until after their post-practice dinner. “We’re going old-school,” she says. Down the hall, Auriemma leans back in his chair and echoes Dailey. Notorious for his demanding nature, he laughs when he relates how his former players accuse him of spoiling today’s players.

“My expectations have not changed, but I think the way I go about it has changed,” he says. Fifteen years ago, he could demand that his players practice a defensive drill over and over until he got tired of watching. “Today, in the world they live in,

I don’t know that I could do that and keep their attention.” He picks up his cellphone. “The circle of who they interact with is bigger. For instance, I can’t get my guys to hate the other team, because they’re all friends.... It’s a different world. I see it in their faces whenever I get really mad at them and explode—they get scared. They feel like there’s a part of me that thinks that I don’t like them ... they have a difficult time discerning the difference between I don’t approve of what you just did and I don’t approve of you.”

A scrappy player at West Chester State in Pennsylvania, Auriemma emulated the us-against-them mentality of Philadelphia basketball. As an assistant at Virginia, he came to admire the talent and unselfishness of Dean Smith’s blue-blooded University of North Carolina men’s teams. When the Tar Heels played at Virginia, Auriemma would go into a soccer coach’s office next to the visiting locker room and eavesdrop on Smith’s halftime talks. His dream, which he believes he has achieved at UConn, was to be a Philly coach with Carolina players. When Auriemma broke Wooden’s UCLA records, he received criticism from people who said that it wasn’t fair to compare the men’s and women’s games, that UConn wasn’t UCLA.

“I never compared us to UCLA,” he says. “Most people saying that weren’t even alive during that streak. I was. I saw who they played, who they beat, the players they had, the fact that back then the tournament was 32 teams and you win two games at home and go to the Final Four. So don’t say ours isn’t equivalent to what they did. I never said ours was better. We’re separate, but equals.”

Auriemma laughs and says he’s frequently asked if he has a coaching philosophy like Wooden’s famous “pyramid of success.” “Look around my office—you don’t see one, do you?” he says. Instead, one sees a spacious office with a new biography of Leonardo da Vinci on the desk, a private bathroom the size of his old office, and a credenza



with 11 national championship trophies lined up, each draped with the nets cut down in victory. Beyond that, a second-story window provides a view of a gleaming new practice court in this, the Werth Family UConn Basketball Champions Center, a \$40 million state-of-the-art facility that opened in 2014 for the

men’s and women’s teams. It’s named for the family of Peter Werth, an Auriemma friend and the founder of a generic-drug development company who donated \$7 million. In a hall overlooking the court, Rebecca Lobo, now an ESPN analyst, is taping interviews and clowning around with Katie Lou Samuelson, who juggles three basketballs, and Crystal Dangerfield, who walks on her hands.

“Yeah, I do have a pyramid of success, and it’s the same one as Coach Wooden,” continues Auriemma, impishly. “His was Kareem, Bill Walton, Jamaal Wilkes, Walt Hazzard, Gail Goodrich. And my pyramid is Sue [Bird] and Dee [Diana Taurasi] and Maya [Moore] and Stewie [Breanna Stewart] and Tina Charles and Rebecca Lobo.” But even if great players make great coaches, coaches don’t automatically win with great players. “Talent, as much as you need it and can’t be successful without it, is also the great killer of most teams,” says Auriemma. “Teams that have a lot of talent can squander it, abuse it, don’t know how to incorporate it into a team atmosphere.” That, says Auriemma, is what UConn’s fans have grown to appreciate, as much as the winning. He constantly reminds his players when they take the court that it’s about how they play the game. “Do you think the person driving up from Danbury or Fairfield is driving to Gampel and the conversation is, ‘So, whaddya think—are our girls gonna win tonight?’ No. The conversation they’re having is, ‘I can’t wait to see them play.’ Guess what? I’m the same way. With our best teams, I go to practice and games saying, ‘I can’t wait to see what they’re gonna do.’ We have to play in a way that inspires people and makes them appreciate the game itself.”

Spring 2017. Once again, March Madness has descended on Storrs. Fans pile into Gampel, their faces painted blue and white. Five male students have painted their bare chests to spell out U-C-O-N-N. A grown man wears a basketball on his head.

The UConn women play sloppily at the start of their first-round game against the University of Albany. Auriemma shakes his head and sits down next to Dailey. (“Geno’s mad,” says one fan. “He sits when he’s mad.”) Following a timeout in which Auriemma gesticulates wildly, the players become a defensive whirlwind: arms and legs flying as they block shots, deny passing lanes, and create turnovers, then fly down the court. Gabby Williams scores on a nice backdoor cut, and Katie Lou Samuelson, she of the pretty jump shot who Auriemma harangues about her defense, takes a charge and bounces back up. Auriemma nods and claps. (“Work on things you’re not good at,” he constantly tells his players.) “We love Geno,” says Caryn Golden, who sits a few rows behind the bench with her husband, Joe. “If he wasn’t a coach, he’d be a psychologist.”

Golden began following the team when Jen Rizzotti, a local girl from New Fairfield High School, went to UConn. She became the starting point guard on the Huskies’ first national championship team, in 1995, and Golden and her husband became season- ticket holders, starting in the nosebleed section and working their way down to courtside. Surveying the sea of gray hair around her, she jokes, “It’s like going down to Florida, isn’t it?” An inspirational speaker and author of such books as *Tao of the Defiant Woman*, Golden says the Huskies have built a multigenerational following that speaks to breaking glass ceilings. When she was in high school on Long Island in the 1950s, girls’ teams were limited to half-court games “because women weren’t supposed to exert themselves—you can’t do this because you’re a girl.” Now 73, with a

defiant streak of red in her silver hair, Golden says older fans look upon the UConn women as their granddaughters, who can achieve whatever they set their minds to. “I use them in my work to show how women have grown from the women’s movement of the sixties to where we are today,” she says. “I explain how hard my generation worked to bring about feminism, and how we don’t want to slide back.” She points at the court. “Look out there. You see a team of ethnically diverse kids, a team of mutual respect, working together. The people in the stands have to adopt every kid from every ethnicity. There’s so

much happening here beyond the game itself.”

Nearby, lawyer and accountant Joseph Hurley is a human stat machine. As the Huskies widen their lead, he can tell you that they have won 24 straight NCAA tournament openers and haven’t lost back-to-back

games in 882 games. Hurley will never forget his first Final Four—one of six he has attended—in Philadelphia in 2000. “I was living in New Jersey, and I traded the use of my townhouse for tickets,” he says. “In the finals, we backdoored Tennessee to death. The final score was 71–52. After the game, word spread about which hotel the party was at. Then we waited until 12:30, and Geno and the players came in, and we got to see the Waterford crystal trophy.”

When the Huskies open up a 44–18 lead, Hurley texts his parents, who are vacationing in Hawaii: OK mom, you can relax. His mother, a retired UConn chemistry professor who taught current assistant coach Shea Ralph when she was the star of that 2000 championship game, has a theory based on probability and the law of averages that UConn will not lose once it gets a 25-point lead.

In the next game, UConn blows out a strong Syracuse team they had beaten in last season’s national championship game. The Huskies play so unselfishly that they score 31 baskets on 30 assists in the first three quarters.



The joy on the faces of Samuelson and hot-shooting Kia Nurse as they laugh and shake their heads in wonder belies the program’s assembly-line reputation. In the stands, former star Morgan Tuck, who graduated in 2016, signs autographs on a night off from playing for the WNBA’s Connecticut Sun.

“You don’t think about it when you’re playing, but then you come back and talk to the fans and you see what it means,” says Tuck. “It’s empowering to all the women who came before us and allowed us to be where we are today. It’s fun, not pressure. There’s a family feel. It sparks young girls, shows them that role models don’t have to be men.” Samuelson, a California girl, could have followed her two sisters to Stanford, but opted for snowy Storrs. She had seen the blue-and-white machine from the outside; once she visited and hung out with the players in their campus apartments, she was won over. “There was a family feeling, and that surprised me, the way they all stuck together,” she says. After the games, “parents will come up to you with their daughters, girls who wear their hair in a bun like me,” adds fellow All-American Napheesa Collier, “There may be an intimidating aura from the outside, but we’re just a bunch of teenage girls having a good time.”

A few weeks later, when the Huskies plays poorly and loses to Mississippi State in the Final Four on a last-second shot, Auriemma just shakes his head and smiles. “They’ve sent a lot of kids to the locker room feeling the way they’re feeling,” he says of his players after that game. “Now they’re part of what a normal college experience is. And I reminded them, ‘This is not normal, what we’ve been doing. This doesn’t happen in real life. And what you’re experiencing now, this is real life.’” Caryn Golden starts receiving text messages offering condolences from friends the next morning. “They thought I was devastated,” says Golden. “But there was no need for morning prayers. In the eyes of many, the season was a failure, which was absurd. OK, this happened. Now it’s on to the next season.”

Next season is here. For Esther MacSwan, Louise Butts, and the rest of Chris’s Kids, watching the exhibition game against Ashland is a chance to see how the new players will blend in. Chris’s Kids send birthday cards to players, as well as get-well cards when



they’re injured. When the women’s games were on public television, they answered the phones during pledge drives. When Chris Dailey visited Covenant Village, she used a 100-year-old resident to demonstrate the pick-and-roll.

At halftime, the Tolland fifth- and sixth-grade travel teams take the Gampel court for an intrasquad scrimmage. The players scamper up and down the court, legs pumping, arms straining, struggling to put up a shot that will reach the basket. A girl with a ponytail leans in and scores on a short jumper, the only basket of the game-within-the-game. Afterward, the girls come off the court, screaming with joy. In the hallway under the stands, they all shriek and jump up and down together. “A-mazing!” two girls shout.

“They’re playing on their court, sitting on their bench,” says one of their coaches, Kristyn Leary. The mother of two, including a 10-year-old daughter who plays on the team, Leary says that when she was in school in Tolland, the only basketball available to girls was through the town’s recreation programs. Still, she loved the game, and admired UConn stars Rebecca Lobo and Jen Rizzotti. She went to Auriemma’s summer camp at Gampel and had UConn parties in her living room, she and her friends painting their faces blue. As the Huskies grew more successful, grass-roots programs for girls flourished in Connecticut. Leary went on to play at Eastern Connecticut State University and later was an assistant coach there. Ashley Buckingham, 11, the ponytailed girl who made the basket for her Tolland team, is flushed with excitement as she sits in the stands. Her favorite player is Katie Lou Samuelson, “but I can’t wear my hair in a bun like hers—I’m afraid it would fall out.” Beside her, teammate Keira Hill, also 11, says she doesn’t have a favorite player but loves Geno. “His quotes are inspirational,” she says.

Ashley says that when she was leaving for the game, her brother said he wished they had tickets to the men’s game. “I said, ‘Well, the women are pretty good.’” “I’ll take his ticket,” says Keira.

“I want to play for UConn,” says Ashley. “We could play here one day. That would be great.” When they finish, Leary jokes, “Your first interview, girls. You’re on your way!”