

END OF THE LINE

Stanford, Ogwumike no match for UConn

By Elliott Almond

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — One of the best college teams of all-time smothered Stanford's hopes of winning its first national title in 22 years as top-ranked and unequaled Connecticut scored a resounding 75-56 victory at the Final Four on Sunday in front of 19,395 at Bridgestone Arena.

The Stanford locker room was devoid of tears despite the final appearance of All-American Chiney Ogwumike, who was held to a season-low 15 points by a hellacious defense that flustered the Pac-12's best player.

Ogwumike, expected to be the top overall pick in the WNBA draft next week, was not downcast although ending her illustrious Stanford career with a third defeat at the Final Four.

"I want to go out there and play them again," she said an hour afterward.

Coach Tara VanDerveer perhaps would prefer otherwise, wondering how many times the Cardinal (33-4) could defeat Connecticut in a 10-game series.

Probably not many when the Huskies feature a lineup of five All-Americans, including college player of the year Breanna Stewart.

UConn (39-0) will defend its national title Tuesday night against Notre Dame in the first battle of unbeaten teams in NCAA history. The Fighting Irish (37-0) swamped fourth-seeded Maryland 87-61 in the other semifinal game despite losing center Natalie Achronwa last week to a knee injury.

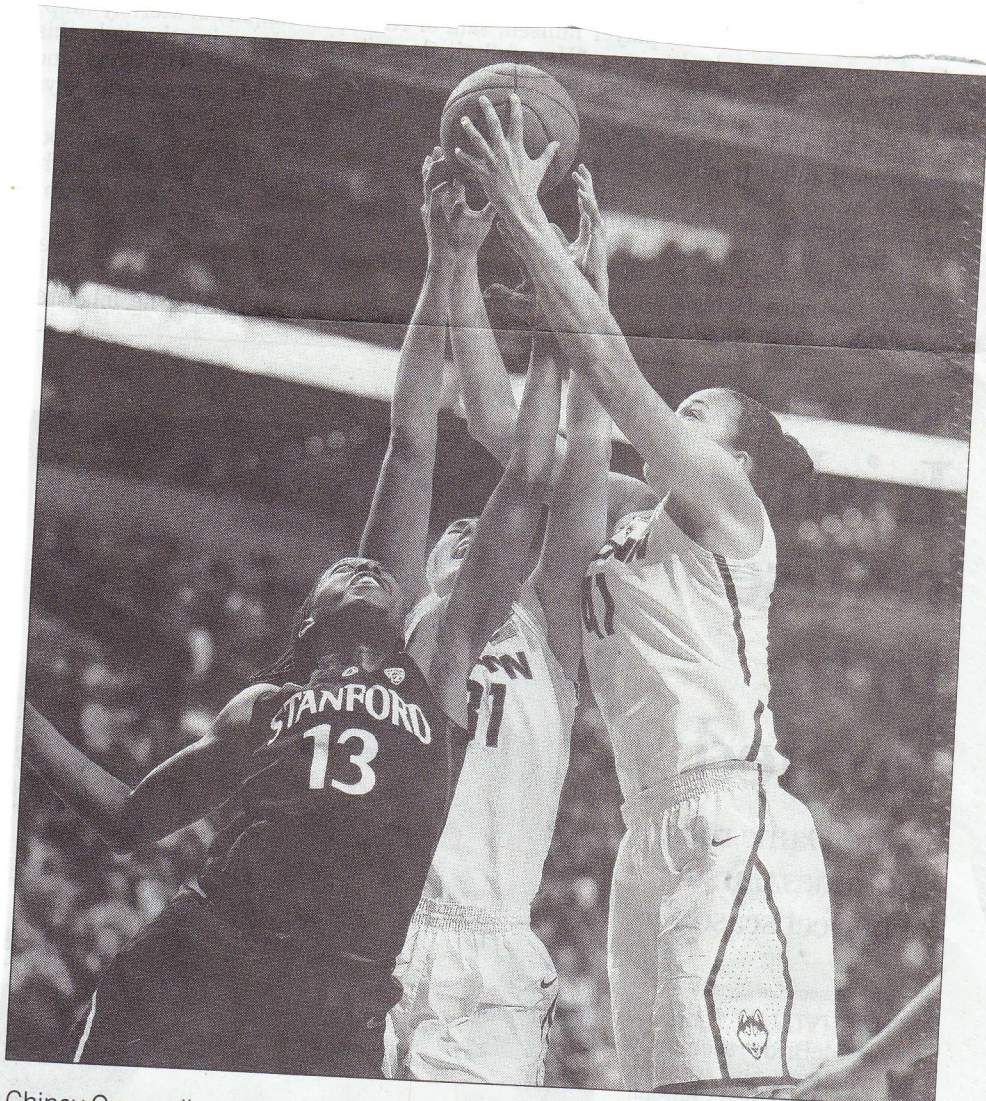
No question the big dogs owned the Big Dance.

All the bright explosion of energy that propelled Stanford to its sixth Final Four in seven years dissipated on the



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Chiney Ogwumike, left, saw her Stanford career end with a season-low 15 points thanks in part to rugged defense from Connecticut's 6-foot-5 Stefanie Dolson, right.



Chiney Ogwumike (13) battles UConn's Stefanie Dolson and Kiah Stokes (41).
NHAT V. MEYER/STAFF

Stanford

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night the music died for the Cardinal.

"They were relentless," said senior Mikaela Ruef, who had six points after scoring 17 in the Elite Eight. "If you can't score, you can't win."

The Cardinal stunned the vaunted Huskies by taking a 22-16 lead with 5:39 left in the half on Ruef's prayer as the shot clock expired.

Just as quickly, the momentum swung east. Connecticut went on a 12-0 run behind center Stefanie Dolson and Stewart, who each scored four points.

The Huskies didn't let up.

UConn jumped to a 44-27 lead with 14:12 left when Stanford made only one of its first nine shots of the second half and was unable to counter a decisive 16-3 run.

"Days like these will make me a better player — and person," said Ogwumike, the Pac-12's all-time scorer and rebounder.

Ogwumike was hounded from the front and behind by 6-foot-3 Kiah Stokes and the 6-5 Dolson.

A player who appeared unstoppable with 27 double-doubles this season was

UConn 75, Stanford 56

STANFORD (33-4) — Thompson 5-9 0-0 12, Ruef 3-9 0-0 6, Ogwumike 5-12 4-6 15, James 0-0 0-0 0, Orange 5-14 4-4 16, Greenfield 0-1 0-0 0, Roberson 0-0 0-0 0, Camp 0-0 0-0 0, McCall 2-2 0-0 4, Payne 0-0 0-0 0, Picknell 0-1 0-0 0, B. Samuelson 1-7 0-0 3, K. Samuelson 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 21-55 8-10 56.

UConn (39-0) — Jefferson 5-10 0-0 10, Hartley 4-12 3-7 13, Mosqueda-Lewis 5-11 4-4 15, Stewart 4-10 9-11 18, Dolson 5-7 0-0 10, Pulido 0-0 0-0 0, Chong 0-0 0-0 0, Banks 0-0 0-0 0, Lawlor 0-0 0-0 0, Stokes 4-4 1-2 9. Totals 27-54 17-24 75.

Halftime — UConn 28-24. **Three-point goals** — Stanford 6-25 (Thompson 2-4, Orange 2-5, Ogwumike 1-3, B. Samuelson 1-7, Greenfield 0-1, Ruef 0-5), UConn 4-15 (Hartley 2-6, Stewart 1-3, Mosqueda-Lewis 1-3, Jefferson 0-3). **Fouled Out** — None. **Rebounds** — Stanford 33 (Ogwumike 10), UConn 35 (Dolson, Stewart 7). **Assists** — Stanford 14 (Orange 5), UConn 15 (Hartley, Jefferson 4). **Total Fouls** — Stanford 16, UConn 10. **A** — 17,548.

neutralized in her final appearance in a Cardinal uniform.

Connecticut's defense was so effective that Stanford tried to isolate Ogwumike to shoot from outside. She made only 5 of 12 shots, 1 of 3 from 3-point range.

Junior guard Amber Orange led Stanford with 16 points, and freshman Lili Thompson added 12, 10 in an impressive first-half performance.

Cardinal players and coaches kept using the word "disruptive" to describe the experience.

For Connecticut coach Geno Auriemma, everything starts with defense. His players underscored the point on a night they shot 50 percent with all of the starters scoring in double figures.

Stewart led the Huskies with 18 points and seven rebounds. But forward Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis did the serious damage after a scoreless first half. She finished with 15 points, and guard Bria Hartley added 13.

"We can do things that other teams can't do," Auriemma said.

UConn put Dolson on Ogwumike and let the other defenders harass the Cardinal sharpshooters.

The usually reliable Bonnie Samuelson made one of seven shots — all from 3-point range.

"They were really big," the 6-3 Samuelson said.

Samuelson's 3-pointer with 5:24 left made it 61-50, and it looked as if Stanford could make UConn uncomfortable for the first time this season.

But Stokes made two low-post baskets, and the Huskies surged to 15-point lead with 3:30 to play as they extended their winning streak to 46 games.

Connecticut, which had defeated opponents by an average margin of 35 points, now goes for a record ninth NCAA title to break a tie with rival Tennessee.

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Cardinal senior class made mark on team

Team veterans helped lead way back to Final Four

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NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Senior Sara James barely held her emotions at bay Sunday inside the stoic Stanford locker room after a 75-56 defeat to Connecticut in the Final Four at Bridgestone Arena.

"It's my last game of basketball I'll ever play," said James, who started but only played for 2 minutes.

James is part of a senior class that includes Chiney Ogwumike, Mikaela Ruef and Toni Kokenis, who had to medically retire because of concussions.

The players left an indelible mark on underclassmen in leading the Cardinal (33-4) back to the Final Four a year after getting eliminated by Georgia in the Sweet 16.

"Without the seniors it's going to be completely different next season," junior Bonnie Samuelson said.

While Ogwumike and Ruef are expected to play professionally, James plans to enroll in graduate school at Columbia University to earn a master's in pediatrics nursing.

"There has been some super highs and super lows," the guard said. "But I wouldn't change a thing."

■ Ogwumike's departure means Stanford won't

have a family member in the lineup next season for the first time in seven years. Chiney followed Nneka Ogumike to Stanford, and led the Cardinal after her sister graduated two years ago.

Chiney Ogwumike didn't let the final minutes get to her emotionally.

"I wasn't really freaking out," she said.

Ogwumike's assessment of the Cardinal's game: "We played about 25 minutes of good defense. We needed to play 40 minutes."

But she found one positive, saying Stanford was more physical than Connecticut.

"People think we're soft but we showed them," Ogwumike said.

■ UConn defeated Stanford by 19 points in the season's second game, but this time it felt closer to the Cardinal.

"It never felt like a blow-out," said Ruef, who missed all five 3-point shots. "I'm sad, but I'm not disappointed. I wouldn't have done anything different. I would have taken those shots, played the same defense. I don't have any regrets."

■ The Huskies made 17 of 24 free throws while Stanford made 8 of 10. The Cardinal didn't take a foul shot in the first half but still trailed by only 28-24.

The disparity at the free throw line bothered coach Tara VanDerveer. But her players had trouble challenging Connecticut's big

front line of 6-foot-5 Stefanie Dolson, 6-4 Breanna Stewart and 6-3 Kiah Stokes.

UConn averaged only 11.8 fouls a game — lowest in the country. A team with a six-player rotation committed only 10 fouls against Stanford.

■ Huskies coach Geno Auriemma appreciated how his team finished Sunday to advance to the national championship game against undefeated Notre Dame (37-0). The game Tuesday night will be the first finale of unbeaten teams in NCAA history.

Auriemma expects his team to be ready after surviving Stanford.

"We played one of the best games that we played all year, given the fact that we beat a really good team," he said.

■ As much as Auriemma downplayed the hype over a UConn-Notre Dame final before the Final Four began, he said Sunday, "as the season went on it almost looked like it was inevitable."

The coach hopes the storyline brings more attention to women's basketball.

"Our sport probably doesn't have enough significant moments," Auriemma added.

He called the Fighting Irish "far and away the best team that I've seen this year. No one else is even close."

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