

After loss to UConn, RMU's Sal Buscaglia says goodbye to coaching

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STORRS, Conn. — It hit Sal Buscaglia with 58 seconds left in the game, after he called a final timeout to put an all-senior lineup on the floor.

Connecticut — who defeated Robert Morris 101-49 in the first round of the NCAA Tournament Saturday — had long since sealed its victory. But instead of just making quick substitutions, Buscaglia stretched the timeout into a full. He needed to press pause, to stay on the floor for just a few more minutes. They would be his last as a basketball coach, and he wasn't quite ready for them to end.

Before the game, he didn't take any moments to soak anything in. Like his team, Buscaglia was focused on the task at hand: Taking on the dynasty that is UConn basketball. But in those last moments, he allowed himself to remember, to appreciate, to say a silent goodbye to the game he's coached for 38 years. Charlie Buscaglia, his son and assistant coach, noticed tears in his eyes.

"I wanted one more last time out," Buscaglia said. "I just wanted it. I said, 'I'm going to get all the seniors on the floor at once.' I just want to go out with them."

When the final buzzer sounded, Buscaglia walked immediately to shake hands with Huskies coach Geno Auriemma. As each UConn player went by, he took an extra moment to say a few words. His team jogged toward the locker room and then, slowly, he started his walk off the court, eyes roaming for the floor to the stands to the rafters. And then he was in the tunnel, in the hallway. The moment had passed.

In his postgame press conference, Buscaglia fought off tears. He talked, voice rough, about his long, expansive career, about how he would now have more time to spend with his family. He talked about his

final Colonials' group, how special they were, how hard they fought even after falling behind UConn 41-4 after the first quarter.

What a way to go out, he said, to see sophomore Megan Smith taking a charge in the fourth quarter or senior Ashley Ravelli racing down the court to try and score a layup before the final buzzer. The Colonials outscored UConn 25-16 in the final quarter of his coaching career. They made him proud.

And, in the end, that's the best send off he could've asked for.

"We were down by 40, 50 points," Buscaglia said afterward with a touch of awe, "and we were still fighting. So, that's what I relayed to them, that's what I told them: Always fight.

"They're a lot of obstacles in life ... I told them don't let anybody get in your way just because you're a female. Knock those walls, jump over them. ...I hope in life they will go on and hear what I said and never let anybody treat them as second class. Never."

Before he left the podium, Buscaglia, unprompted, made a passionate plea for the reporters in the room to cover women's basketball. ("Go after it," he said. "Do it. Female student athletes deserve it in every sport.") It's no surprise that's the topic he chose. He spent the entirety of his career demanding the athletes he coaches get the same respect as their male counterparts. Of course that's how he spent his very last seconds.

"He's always advocating for women's basketball, and you can see the result," said Charlie, who will take over the program next year. "These kids know they're special. They know they're truly special, and that's how he treats his players."

"It feels amazing," said senior Ashley Ravelli, "To know that your coach as well as your coaching staff has your back, it means everything. As a player, you got out there knowing that they have your back and you just fight. You fight with everything you have for them."

Afterward, in a quiet locker room, Buscaglia talked about what he'll miss the most. The game, of course. The coaching. The routine. But the day-to-day interaction might be what's hardest for him to leave behind. He'll just miss his players.

Buscaglia doesn't like to fly. Charlie goes on the international recruiting trips and Buscaglia opts to drive to the Colonials' away games. But he knows many members of this team will eventually return to their home countries. Ravelli plans to head back to Italy. Lou Mataly is from France. Stamolamprou, a junior, came from Greece. For them, he just might have to make an exception.

"All of them have said, 'Coach, if you come to my country you've got a place to stay,'" Buscaglia said. "So, it's so nice. A lot of coaches don't get that relationship with their players. There's animosity or something like that. I don't have that. We're bonded. We're one."

Buscaglia won 711 games in his career, taking Robert Morris to the NCAA Tournament four times. His legacy is undeniable, and there's so much Charlie said he learned from him. He learned how to coach without an ego. He learned how to fight for the team at all times. Buscaglia always pushed them to do better. Charlie wants to do that, too.

But what Buscaglia most wants Charlie to take away is a message very similar to the one he gave his players: Have a little fire.

"Go after it with everything you have," Buscaglia said. "Do it in a good way, do it in a professional way, a sportsmanlike way. But have that passion, have that drive. I think that's the most important thing.

"(Charlie's) taught me a lot about the x's and o's. Hopefully, I've taught him about the passion."