

American Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Saturday, March 14, 2026

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena At The BJCC

Charlotte 49ers

Coach Aaron Fearne

Anton Bonke

Postgame Press Conference



South Florida 86, Charlotte 64

THE MODERATOR: All right, we are joined on the podium by Charlotte head coach Aaron Fearne and Anton Bonke. Coach, let's just start with some general comments from you.

AARON FEARNE: Yeah, hats off to South Florida. They've had a sensational season and been unbelievably consistent. Coach has done a fantastic job with their system and their players, and the pressure that they put on you to be very tough, very, very good in all phases of the game. You've got to really concentrate to really compete with them to put enough pressure back on them.

I thought the guys did a got job, a couple of positions around that 12-, 13-minute mark. You can feel the momentum shift that way a little bit and they punched us back and were able to push away.

I'm very proud of our group and our university and the work that all our coaches have put in, the players have put in. We've grown a lot. At the end of the day, we were picked last in the league and we proved that we weren't. I'm really proud of everybody for that.

Q. Coach talk about that run in the second half. The last two games, you've been that team that's doing that.

AARON FEARNE: I don't even know what we shot in the second half but it wasn't 77% that we shot the last two days, so as they say, there's some bit of madness in March. We've done a couple of crazy things here in those two games.

We needed a little bit of that tonight against a team like that, but, yeah, like I said, I think they just put too much

pressure on you and they've done to a number of teams this year and credit to them.

I wish them all the best moving forward. We'll see who plays tomorrow. It will be a really good game.

Q. Coach, I do want to ask you a two-part question here. Obviously, congratulations on a good season but how do you use this momentum you have from this season to carry it over to next season? But also I asked Coach this earlier, talking about this conference as a whole, what is your perspective on getting more teams at-large bids to the NCAA Tournament where the American gets back to getting three, four, five teams in the NCAA Tournament?

AARON FEARNE: I mean, yeah, to do that, I guess metrically we've got to schedule really, really hard and we have to win those games. But I think this is putting pressure on the Mountain West, the WCC, the A10. I think we're all in similar situations.

Trust me, we all try to schedule those teams. A lot of them don't want anything to do with it. They know our league's good. They know our league's good because they recruit a lot of our players out of it. We had more turnover than any conference in America last year and a lot of our guys go up to those levels and play.

The rules have got to change for us to be able to keep players so we can consistently build so we can get multiple teams into the NCAA Tournament out of this league. I think that's the issue for a lot of leagues that are at our level to do that, because it's a bit of breeding ground for the power four conferences. We've got power four-type athletes in this league and athleticism and, there's a lot of unbelievable coaches in this league that improve a lot of their players and go on and do really, really well.

We're happy for the players but we wish we could keep those guys to help out teams really compete with those power four programs to get us into the NCAA Tournament.

Q. Coach, South Florida's head coach just came in



and said he felt like you guys were a different team than when you guys played last. Talk about the resilience, three games, three days and what it took to get here and maybe what he means about being a different team.

AARON FEARNE: I credit their university first for their game day atmosphere down there. It was awesome. I thought their environment there was fantastic. Their student turnout, their energy in the building, the way they put on their game night was like no other in our league.

It puts more pressure on you, too, in that environment which is fun and I know as coaches we want to coach in that and the players want to play in that environment. It was senior day and they had everything go their way and that energy in the building extends those runs longer and that's what a home crowd can really do for you. Today we changed our game plan a little bit.

We wanted to gather a little bit differently. I thought the guys -- 36% from the field and for an explosive offensive program like that, you're doing some really good things to give yourself an opportunity, which we did. But can you sustain it? That's the challenge. They put a lot of pressure on you to be unbelievably tough and little slippages here and there, the pressure builds, they break you and they get back to building it again.

But I thought we did an unbelievable job of that, too. We got ourselves to that 12-, 13-minute mark, all right, here we go. We can give ourselves a chance here and just couldn't get it done.

Q. Anton, talk about the season. Was mentioned picked last in the conference, the fight, the pride that your team came in with this week two big wins, a great effort today.

ANTON BONKE: I just want to thank my teammates, thank Coach Fearne for the opportunity to be in the position to do what I did this season, so it's really all them.

Q. Anton, 15 points, nine rebounds, assist, steals good stuff from you. What was about them that made things harder today?

ANTON BONKE: They got some good shooters. They got the player of the year in Isaiah Nelson. They went on some runs and we weren't able to have more points than them at the end of the game.

Q. For both you guys, you talked in the past every team is obviously different, has its own journey. Talk about what this one was like 34 games, finish 17-17,

very fun run down there; and for Anton, similar, what was your favorite part of this year's team?

ANTON BONKE: I think just Fearne is really good at just getting a team to love each other, and I feel like we did. We really enjoyed each other's company. Every dinner, every meal together. The table's always super loud. We always hang out with each other outside the court, so I think that's the biggest takeaway. Just the connections we've built.

I think we're friends for life, even though we didn't achieve what we wanted to achieve.

BRYAN HODGSON: Yeah, I think the ultimate goal for me as a coach, and it's always been this, can you bring a lot of different individuals from with our group, all corners of the world and can you get them to connect.

We've got a lot of foreign players and so the American foreign player education of each other is unbelievable and a lot of fun. A couple of our guys don't speak great English so we have some fun with that. Ultimately, you just want to connect as a unit to go on a very channelling journey together and you learn a lot of really hard lessons along the way.

You have frustrations with each other and coaches have frustrations with players and players do with coaches and you go through all that and like Anton said, you come to a finishing point where you ultimately want to be playing your best basketball at the right time of the year and our team did that this year, which was awesome.

Playing for one another. I say to them all the time, they've got to submit to each other and play for their teammates and not play for them. They did that. You don't do what we did the last couple of days if we're not connected like that. You do build relationships that these guys are going to have for a long, long time. These guys are going to grow up and be all around the world and they'll bump into each other as they go through their basketball journeys around the world.

I always say use basketball as a vehicle to take you different places, and this team has that with a lot of the international flavor we have.

I wish all those guys that their college years are done today, we wish them the best moving forward. We'll do everything we can to help them as we have with all our past Charlotte 49ers, and I keep in contact with all those guys very often here. That's what it's about. You want to see them learn and grow and they helped me grow. They help our coaches grow and they help each other grow.



That's the fun part of coaching team sport.

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