

National Invitation Tournament: Tulsa vs Auburn

Sunday, April 5, 2026
Indianapolis, Indiana, USA
Gainbridge Fieldhouse

Auburn Tigers

Steven Pearl

Kevin Overton

Tahaad Pettiford

Final Postgame Press Conference



Auburn 92, Tulsa 86

THE MODERATOR: Joining us are head coach, Steven Pearl, and student athletes, the Tournament Most Outstanding Player, Kevin Overton, and All Tournament Selection, Tahaad Pettiford.

And Coach, if you would go ahead and make the opening statement, and then we'll open it up for a few questions for the players.

STEVEN PEARL: You know, first off, just really proud of our guys. Always walking in late.

Proud of our guys. You know, lesser-character kids, lesser-character young men would have folded it up and, you know, just gotten to the off-season. This group didn't. They used this as an opportunity to compete. They used this as an opportunity to gain some positive moment going into an off-season, an important off-season for all of us.

And I'm incredibly grateful as their coach. You know, they were put in a really difficult situation, Coach ultimately retiring, and these guys all decided to stay.

And then we don't make the Tournament, and they call all could have packed it in, and they didn't. It's just, for me, I'm just thankful that they are getting some reward for all the effort that they put into the season. They stayed consistent, they stayed right.

We have a really good basketball team, and I feel like we showed that over these last five games. Tulsa is a really good basketball team. They obviously made a tremendous run.

This game was kind of a microcosm of our season. You know, played really well. Let them back into it, went through a tough stretch, and we stayed resilient, we didn't give up, pushed that thing to overtime and played overtime with five guards. We have no size and everyone was fouled out. You know, they pushed through and they found a way. So I'm really proud and grateful for these guys.

Q. Take us through the game and the deep three in overtime. What was going through your mind? Was it designed for you to go through that? Looked like an out-of-bounds play?

KEVIN OVERTON: That's just a regular play we have. Can't really give the scheme of what it is, but it's not exactly for me. We have a couple different --

Q. Can you talk about the scheme?

KEVIN OVERTON: A bit -- well, we got a couple different options out of that, but I'm not going to give that up for other reasons.

But yeah, it was just, basically, a moment play. I was kind of prepared for it. I just slipped out of it, like I always do. I ran it right. He gave me the ball, and I was, like I said, ready for the moment and I knocked it down.

The deep-through was kind of heat-check. I feel like that was a normal shot for me all year; so I just shot it and it went in.

Q. You guys come up big on defense in overtime without any size, really, or basically playing five guards, like SP said. What was the key to that, especially considering how tough the second half was on defense?

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: We knew how important it was, especially letting them come back; the lead that we had, letting that go. We stayed together and knew that we needed stops and we had to break them down, and that's what we did in overtime.

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Q. After missing March Madness, you guys didn't quit and accepted the bid to the NIT, and tonight when you had your backs against the wall, you didn't waver. What does that say about the character of the guys in your locker room?

KEVIN OVERTON: I think it says a lot. I think we all had that moment of doubt in the year. Truthfully we didn't really want to play. Like you said, we could have packed it up. But we came together. We made a decision.

Like you said, once we started playing it became, okay, it's basketball at the end of the day and we're still competitors. Let's go win the game. Obviously we didn't want to be where we were but we are the ones that got in that situation, so let's just go make the best of it.

Q. You talked about the importance of this for you, redemption from last season. Talk about the first half, you were really lighting it up, and then struggled midway through but got tough buckets down the stretch. Talk about that finish and the windmill dunk at the end.

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Try to come out hot in a championship game. Want to set the tone early for my team and let the other team know that better here to play. Happy I was able to get off to that start.

Second half, coming out, didn't shoot the best throughout the middle of it. But just having guys like KO, Key, Elyjah, Filip, everybody, the whole -- everybody, the whole team, just having my back, telling me to keep playing my game. And I know if I hit him, he's going to make a big shot any time. So just knowing I've got teammates around me that support me.

Q. What was that message going into the overtime period, seeing how that second half closed out?

KEVIN OVERTON: I think we were focused. At that point, there wasn't a whole lot to talk about. We kind of knew whether we were so we just listened to game plan, what the coaches said. And we just had a togetherness and a feel to us, and we just went out there and we played.

Q. You guys lose Murph at the beginning of the tournament and you're having to play Filip at the point.

KEVIN OVERTON: That was for three.

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Yes.

Q. Filip and Sway haven't played center throughout

the tournament. What did it say about them, being having to play undermanned, not having played a ton?

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Just shows they are dogs, playing a five and a four when they usually don't and in big moments, stepping up. For both of them being freshmen, it's huge for them.

So I'm just happy that they was able to perform the way they were and help us come out with the win.

Q. You guys came out on fire on the defensive end. They obviously battled back, and y'all finished strong on defense. What was the key? Because this was a really high-scoring team, especially the way they like to shoot from three.

STEVEN PEARL: I thought our guys were really locked into the game plan. Did a really good job of running them off the three-point line and making their catches difficult.

I thought we turned them over a good bit in the first half. They respected their opponent. That team has won 30 games this year. You know, it's hard to do. And their personnel is really good, and they have got guys that can really knock down shots and make big plays, and we obviously saw that in the second half.

Our guys did a really good job early, coming out engaged and focused and in stance. That was important because we only have seven guys. So I knew eventually that our legs would get to us a little bit and they would get back into the game.

But I thought earlier our guys did a great job putting us in a position to have a lead where we were able to hang in there and ultimately found a way to close it out in the end.

Q. What kind of was that difference in the second half for them to get back into that game?

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, I thought offensively, we weren't making shots, and a lot of our misses led to transition. You know, they had 16 points on fastbreaks, and I bet most of those were in the second half. You know, they didn't double the post as much, and we didn't get those kickout threes. We missed a bunch of layups. And they had a lot to do with that.

But I thought a couple times we didn't slow down around the rim and finish through contact, and that led to them getting out in transition. And that's a team that if you give them a little bit of confidence, obviously they are going to run with it. They did that, and you know, shoot, they are up five with a minute left in the game.

Our offense wasn't crisp and it wasn't great in the second half, but then to go four-for-five in overtime and five-for-six from the free throw line, they did a great job of bouncing back and making the right plays late.

Q. Now that the season has wrapped up, how do you want the Auburn family to remember this group?

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, I mean, it's a group that was put through a tremendous amount of adversity. I can't say it enough: With Coach retiring, the schedule we put in front of them, only having one returner, nine underclassmen, ten new guys. I want the Auburn family to remember this group for their resilience and their toughness and their ability to stay together through some difficult stretches.

You know, it's a group that really appreciated what the Auburn family gave to them and the support that they gave. I think they just kind of wanted to do the fan base proud and the university proud, and I felt like they did that over the last couple weeks.

Q. At what point did you know that your team was locked in and serious about winning? Was it at the beginning of the tournament or before the tournament began? When did you know they were ready?

STEVEN PEARL: It probably wasn't till the first half of the Seattle game, the second game we played. Second half of the first game, KO hit seven 3s and kind of went unconscious. He was tremendous and obviously allowed us to win that game.

When I saw how we came out and guarded in the first half of the Seattle game, I knew that our guys were locked in and were playing for something at that point and I thought they carried that really well through the next four games.

We beat five good teams. We beat five good teams without our starting center. I mean, that's -- to me, that's significant. We had a bunch of guards out there for the last five games, and we beat all five teams. So our guys just were locked in.

But I thought that Seattle game is where they turned the corner and flipped the switch.

Q. Going back to KO, he hits the three to tie it up. He hits the big one in overtime and he had an incredible tournament. Just what have you seen from him, especially this postseason, just stepping up and leading you guys on both ends of the floor but also playing the best ball of his season?

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, he's been playing well since late January. He had a calmness to his demeanor when we ultimately decided to play in the NIT.

You know, I think he and Keyshawn Hall were two of the main guys that really pulled the group together and said, all right, we're here. We might as well compete. We might as well make the most of a difficult situation and show the country why we should be in the tournament.

We lost 16 games, though, right. That's why we didn't make the tournament. But I feel like we've shown over the last five, and KO really wanted to do that, especially, that we are one of the best teams in the country, and I feel like we've proved that -- or at least one of the teams that was good enough to be in the tournament, and I think KO wanted to prove that point. And he obviously did a phenomenal job of doing so.

Q. Elyjah gets in early foul trouble and doesn't foul again rest of the way. Has 14 rebounds and he key for y'all on defense. Hits those two late free throws after having a tough day at the line. What does it say about him and the continued impact he's been able to make here this season?

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, Elyjah has been great with his role and understanding his role because he's all about winning. You know, he only had -- he had three shots but he did get to the foul line eight times. He's got to get more touches. But obviously Tahaad and KO had it going. But he's able to find ways to be impactful in other areas.

So obviously rebounding. He had some ridiculous contests at the rim late in the game and keeping balls alive but ten defensive rebounds and a lot of those I thought came late in the game when we really needed them. He's got so much untapped potential, and for it being his first year in high major basketball, the sky is the limit for him. Really hope that we can tap into that this summer and watch him continue to improve.

Q. At the start of the tournament, you said this wasn't the goal for you guys, but how do you use this victory to build on your tenure as head coach?

STEVEN PEARL: You've got to use it as positive momentum going into the off-season. I feel like the guys that we want to have return are obviously in a better place mentally. You know, seeing what it's capable of looking like. Especially with the limited numbers that we were able to do it with, if we're able to in this off-season plug some of those holes that we need to, especially with rim protection; I think Narcisse is going to be a great start to that.

I'd love to get Filip back to his natural position at the four. I'd love to get Sway to play three and four, you know what I mean. Those guys don't need to be playing five. That's just not their position.

Being able to find pieces that can encourage the rest of these guys to come back and continue to finish the job, I think is important. I think this run and this decision to play in this tournament, there was a lot of that that factored into my decision, and you know, it could have blown up in your face.

But to our guys' credit, to our staff's credit -- our staff has done such a great job all year, going through the highs and the lows, and they have stayed consistent with our guys. They have poured into our guys, loved on our guys and our guys have received that really well.

I think they came out here and they made me proud, they made our staff proud, they made our university proud and I think they showed the nation what this team is built on, and for that, that's something we can build on moving forward.

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