

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Yale vs Auburn

Thursday, March 21, 2024

Spokane, Washington, USA

Spokane Veterans Memorial Arena

Auburn Tigers

Bruce Pearl

Denver Jones

Jaylin Williams

Johni Broome

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: We'll get started with questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Let's start with a general statement from each of you just on being in Spokane and your first round matchup and we'll start with Johni and work our way down.

JOHNI BROOME: I feel like this team, myself and the coaching staff, is excited to be in Spokane and excited to play our first game in March Madness. It's every kid's dream to play in this game, in this atmosphere, but we're excited to play Yale and ready to get to it.

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: Yeah, this is my first time being out here. So I wanted to go somewhere I've never been in my life, so this is a place I wanted to be, especially with this group of teammates and coaching staff. And leading into the tournament after the SEC tournament, winning that, and coming into here with confidence was the big key to being here.

DENVER JONES: I'm just excited to be in this position I'm in. I've always dreamed of being here, March Madness. This is my first time actually being here and actually being in Spokane, Washington. I'm just really excited to play and get to the first round.

Q. Jaylin, you said it there, this team is coming off an incredible weekend playing three great games in the SEC tournament. What is the confidence level right now and how do you all feel after winning the SEC



tournament having some days off and now getting here in Spokane?

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: To be honest, it hasn't really felt like we had any days off since, like, the post-season started. Having a day off the day of Selection Sunday was basically like our travel back to Auburn and getting our feel back and then we're back to practicing again. So we always are prepared at the best of our abilities. Our coaching staff gets us to that point to where -- like, they give us the answers to the test and we just got to take advantage of it.

Q. You guys lost two straight at mid season on the road, and then I think you guys have lost once since then. What changed for you guys in SEC play that's allowed you to play as well as you have over these last six weeks?

DENVER JONES: Can you repeat the question?

Q. Why have you guys played as well as you have over the last six weeks?

DENVER JONES: Honestly, really just a great game plan that our coaches have put in play. Thanks to our scout team as well. They prepared us great for the teams that we played in the SEC. So I would probably say kudos to our coaches and scout team.

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: I would say, for me and my teammates, we're older on the team, so we understand the whole process. Six weeks ago, people tell us, like, this is it, this is our team, so we got to go out there and give it our all. I feel like that hit us and just made us more locked in with the scout, and the things we eat, when we go to sleep, and those things really helped us throughout the last six weeks.

JOHNI BROOME: Six weeks ago we was 8 in the country, I think, before we went and lost those two games in a row. So I feel like losing those two was a wakeup call because this team is very special and we could have won both those games easily, and we knew that. So we just got to limit and clean up a couple things and we can go a long way, and since then, we kind of turned it around.



Q. Spokane is a space, a city, that has little diversity, but it's growing. From a young black male's perspective, what would you say to some other young black males who are trying to just work hard in getting to this next level of playing? What would you encourage them or say to them to do?

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: Me growing up in a small town, like, there wasn't really much there. So I didn't know that growing up there because that was the norm for me. I just loved playing basketball. So if you keep playing and keep enjoying the things, you do the right things, God is going to bless you. Like, I ended up doing the right things, going to Atlanta, driving four and a half hours and -- just you got to make sacrifices if you want to be who you want to be in life.

JOHNI BROOME: Kind of like what Jaylin said, life's about sacrifices and choices in life. At a young age, if you can make the choices and get in the gym or doing whatever you love, whether you're playing football, getting on the field and just working on your craft rather than going out partying. I'm pretty sure everybody -- all of us would have liked to have had a little more fun growing up as like our friends would do, but like Jaylin said, sacrifices are necessary.

DENVER JONES: I agree with Jaylin. You have to enjoy doing what you're doing. You got to keep working hard at it, no matter what the outcome is. I know for me I had to make a lot of sacrifices and for me that was going up to Memphis and playing in prep school up there. So if I was them, I would just say, you have to make a lot of sacrifices in order to get to where you want to get to.

Q. What was your reaction to finding out three Alabama schools were all sent up here to Spokane?

JOHNI BROOME: I was kind of surprised with being in Alabama and three schools going all this way to Spokane, Washington. I think that's like 28 hundred miles, something like that. But the draw is kind of a weird draw, but we're all excited.

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: For me, I just kind of focused on our team. But it is special for, like, the state in general because you got a lot of fans that are Auburn fans, Alabama fans, and people that went to UAB, and so there are fans of all three. So it's special to have all three of these teams in the tournament and we're just going to see who advances the longest.

DENVER JONES: I was a little shocked seeing all three of us on the same side, but it is special seeing three Alabama teams here on the same side, and most likely, there are

probably going to be fans of all three of us, so fans can come watch us play anytime, so I feel like it's kind of a blessing too at the same times to have three teams from Alabama here in Spokane.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll dismiss these three and bring Coach up in just a moment.

(Pause.)

THE MODERATOR: So we'll ask for a quick opening statement and then we'll open it up for questions.

BRUCE PEARL: We're very excited about being in this NCAA tournament and being selected as part of this field. We have great respect for our opening round opponent, Yale. If you've looked at the Ivy League in the last eight years, how that league has performed, they have won three games, Yale beating Baylor back in 2016, last year, obviously, when Princeton as the 2 seed upset -- excuse me, as the 15 seed upset the 2 seed, Arizona.

So we have great respect for them, we have great respect for their league, great respect for this team, and their players and their coaching staff. They do a terrific job. They're really, really hard to cover. With their five-out offense, it's very, very -- it's a unique offense and it's something that we see some but don't see a ton. Probably the area that Yale would be the most underrated is their defense and their rebounding. They're a real solid defensive team. They play at one of the slower paces in the country, but part of the reason is because they will take good shots on the offensive end, which sometimes could take some time, but what people don't appreciate is the fact that it takes you awhile with your offense to get a good shot because they're so solid defensively. So we know that we'll have to play well to win.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach?

Q. Could you just talk about the matchup of the two post players in this game, if you would.

BRUCE PEARL: Well, when talk about Auburn's matchup in the post, you got to talk about both Dylan Cardwell and Johni Broome against Danny Wolf. Danny is a terrific player. He's one of the best Jewish basketball players in the country and I'm one of the few Jewish coaches in the country. That doesn't make me one of the best. I'm just one of the few. And by the way, congratulations to Keith Dambrot today from Duquesne, also a member of the tribe.

Danny's a tough cover. He is really big, he's got great skills, he can put the ball on the floor, he can pass it with either hand, he can score it over either shoulder, he's got a



real good feel for the game. You can say the same thing about Johni Broome. Offensively, Johni can score either side and he can score inside and out. Johni's probably a better three-point shooter.

And Dylan, who is a great defender in his own right and one of the best defenders in the SEC, who gets very little recognition because he comes off the bench for us, our ability to guard Danny and handle all the things that he can do offensively will go a long way towards whether or not we can win this contest.

Q. Obviously you guys got a lot of attention for the run you made last week winning the SEC tournament. But you guys have been pretty good for about six weeks now. Kind of what have you seen -- there was that two-game losing streak on the road you had in late January. Kind of from your perspective, what turned after that that's led to you guys playing as well as you have since then?

BRUCE PEARL: I thought even on that road trip we lost at Alabama and at Mississippi State, we were guarding, we were at least guarding and we were in both games. But we weren't making shots. So with the exception of maybe going down to Florida and getting dominated by the Gators, we were pretty much in every game. So the combination of continuing to guard pretty consistently throughout the year with great effort and energy using 10 guys, not getting dominated on the boards, although there were times when we weren't -- didn't always have the advantage, but not getting dominated and then doing a better job of taking advantage of Auburn offense, better offensive efficiency, getting better shots, not turning the ball over as much, and continuing to play unselfishly, actually being a little bit more physical with our offense. You combine all that and, yeah, we've been playing our best basketball here down the stretch.

Q. Wanted to ask you about Chad. Obviously he was at the San Diego State, JC, had some academic issues, very fiery player. What was behind the decision to take him and how has he met your expectations, etcetera, etcetera?

BRUCE PEARL: He's met my high expectations. I got to tell you, the coach at San Diego State had nothing but great things to say about him as a competitor, as a young man. We know how passionate he is and that went a long way to our wanting to take him because he's got a great heart.

And then went to junior college and he was very successful there, got his degree, and they had the same things to say about him. Being in relationship with him, with Chad, is

important. It's more than just basketball for him. I knew that if we brought him in, I had the kind of coaching staff -- we hold our kids accountable both on and off the court and we have a high expectation for them on and off the court, and we have relationships with 'em. This is a ministry more than just coaching. That fit really well with Chad.

And then of course two years later, after he learned from -- some time learning from some mistakes. I promise you that last year when San Diego State made their run, he was rooting for them, but he also recognized that rather being down in Pensacola, Florida, he could have been at the Final Four. He missed that opportunity. He puts that on himself and now here you are seeing him back in the NCAA tournament.

Q. I really thought over those three games in the SEC tournament you all really imposed your will and your style on the teams there and brought a physicality and an intensity you needed to win those games there. Obviously, some physical battles. How do you continue -- what has been the message to the team to continue to bring that intensity and that level of play now after you -- you really spent a lot there in Nashville.

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah, I thought we played really hard. I thought we didn't take possessions off. I thought that we stayed down in our stance. We extended when it was time to extend. We tried to defend without fouling. So I do think again we were on a mission to go win the tournament. We talked about trying not to lose again. That was something that's sort of been our focus and one of the things that it's going to take. When you finish second in a league like that this year -- and late in the year we went to Knoxville with about four games left, and we knew if we could have won that game, then we had a real good chance to win the league regular season. We were right there, but Dalton Knecht was just tremendous that night, particularly in the second half. Once we lost that game there, the championship, regular season championship was lost. So we began to then focus on what's the next championship out there, and that of course was the SEC tournament.

Q. You said they had a mission to win the SEC tournament, now a mission here. I know you had said this team planned to not lose again. What is it about this team that you feel right now that y'all are in the driver's seat on making a run here?

BRUCE PEARL: I don't know that we're in the driver's seat. I don't. I think that what we've always done, and what I've tried to do, is just compartmentalize this, make it smaller for the players. We have to win two games to get to the Sweet 16. We can't do that until we win the first one.

So, oftentimes, the toughest game in this tournament to win is the first one. So, we understand that, you know, if we played Yale a lot of times over a period of time, we would have the advantage, because we're deeper and we're a little bigger, and folks would say we're better, we have a better seed than they do. But they can beat us in a game. Absolutely. They led Kansas for 30 minutes this year. Y'all saw them in Spokane play with Gonzaga and had a double-digit lead at some point early in that game. So, but there are four teams in this pod, us and Yale and San Diego State and UAB. And those are the four teams, one of those teams is going to the Sweet 16, so that's how we're compartmentalizing it.

Q. I know you said you're thrilled to be in the tournament in any capacity, but you're a 4 seed, SEC tournament champion, and you get shipped 2,000 miles from campus. Was there some disappointment with that, and do you find some novelty in the fact that you got you, UAB and Alabama all here?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, first of all, I don't spend a lot of time complaining about seeding. It's a tough process and there are great teams. You got to beat great teams if you're going to advance in this tournament. So it really, that doesn't matter. I'm thrilled to be in Spokane. What a beautiful city and the reception from the people have been terrific. I just would rather come here and go fish with Mark than necessarily have my fans have to come all the way out here. It is a hardship. The pod system was created so that your fan base, and as much as that, your families of players, have the opportunity to see them play in this one shining moment situation. So, yeah, sometimes some things don't make as much sense, but, look, we, again, we're thrilled to be in this thing. This is, I think, the fifth time that Auburn has been in it, maybe the fifth time in six years or something like that, so I am not going to complain one bit.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Thank you, Coach.

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