

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 11, 2022

Auburn Tigers

Tampa, Florida, USA

Amalie Arena

Coach Bruce Pearl Wendell Green Jabari Smith

Postgame Press Conference

Texas A&M 67-Auburn 62

BRUCE PEARL: Congratulations to Texas A&M. I hope for Texas A&M and for our conference that that's enough to get them in the tournament. They just beat one of the best teams in the country and beat us from start to finish, and should not leave any doubt as to whether or not they belong.

They finished fifth in the league, and they finished fifth in the toughest league in the country, and so I'm not sure -- I know that whatever coaches have to say doesn't hold any weight when it comes to tournament time.

I've just been doing this for 40 years, and I know what teams look like who deserve to be in, and that team does.

We respected them. We prepared. It is very -- it's a unique time when you have a first round bye and you are trying to get ready for two teams and it's a short window, and so I thought, you know, we didn't have a great -- we didn't have a great execution of our game plan.

We had two or three guys play really well, and you just need more than that. We're a team that plays better when everybody contributes, and obviously, if you take Jabari and Wendell out of the three-point equation, because obviously we were 9 for 36. We shot 6% as a team other than Wendell and Jabari from three.

That's just something that obviously would have made our offense a lot better. It's been something that's plagued us all year.

Q. For both of you guys: Going into the NCAA tournament, what do you think is sort of the most



important thing to prioritize in terms of avoiding letting short scoring droughts turn into longer ones? Is it just knocking down shots? Is it more it of a flow to the actions ya'll are running? Or what do you see as sort of the main thing to prioritize there?

THE MODERATOR: Wendell, would you take that first?

WENDELL GREEN: I would just say we got to hit open shots. They were leaving us wide open in the first half and we were missing, so we got to hit open shots.

I think our defense has been good all season, but, yeah, we just got to hit open shots.

THE MODERATOR: Jabari.

JABARI SMITH JR: I would say just keep defending. Yeah, like he said, hit open shots. Keep shooting it. Keep having confidence and keep passing to the open man.

We know eventually they'll start falling.

Q. You guys are still going to be in the NCAA tournament, but what kind of wake-up call does this give you guys going into that? Oh, yeah, for I guess either of you. Wendell.

WENDELL GREEN: Well, it's hard to win, you know, in March. You are playing against -- every team in the tournament is going to be good. Just got to be ready to play, come out there.

Like Coach said before the game today, you have to throw the first punch, so we just got to be ready to play. This is for sure going to make us more hungry, and hopefully just take it one game at a time and go deep in the tournament.

Q. Wendell, what was it about their defense in the first half that was making it difficult for you all to get inside?

WENDELL GREEN: They collapsed inside, so they made us shoot open shots. They gave us open shots. We just have to hit open shots. We were penetrating, making plays



for each other. I feel like we shared the ball unselfishly. We trusted each other.

We just didn't hit shots in the first half or the whole game really. They were collapsing, and we just got to hit open shots.

Q. Same for Jabari.

JABARI SMITH JR: Yeah, they kind of forced us into helping out the strong side. Had a very packed-in defense and forced us to trust our teammates and make the extra pass, which I feel like we did pretty well.

But as it goes back to just making open shots, and they just wasn't falling tonight.

Q. Jabari, I think we all agree that the SEC is a tough league. Some say it's the toughest league in America. When you speak with some of your colleagues, maybe people who have gone to other schools, played in other conferences, what do you think is their perception of the Southeastern Conference?

JABARI SMITH JR: I feel like they know how tough it is. You know, when SEC schools play other conferences and stuff like that, I feel like they know how more physical it is and just how competitive it is all 40 minutes.

Everybody on the floor can play, everybody is capable of making a play, so you know it's just real tough. That's why can I came to play in the best league in the country.

Q. Jabari, are you -- how sure are you that K.D. is going to be able to bounce back from his performance today?

JABARI SMITH JR: I'm 100% sure he will be able to bounce back. Just an off shooting night. I know how good he is. I know he going to get back in the gym and just get back to him making shots, getting downhill, finishing, making plays.

So I'm not worried at all. He will be good.

Q. Coach, Buzz Williams, was up here just a few minutes ago and talked about how they don't have a true rim defender. When you had those open looks in the first half, is that to say, hey, we're just going to keep chipping away at this and home some are going to go home, or was there a concerted effort to help feed the paint a little bit more?

BRUCE PEARL: I guess I'll have to go back and take a look at it. I thought that they did a nice job with their

switching defenses, and they switched one through four with those four guards.

Then we rolled down a little bit on the inside, and they double-teamed us and kicked it out, because you're getting double-teamed on the inside.

You know, we don't have a back-to-the-basket player, right? So for them, Henry Coleman is a pretty decent back-to-the-basket player. Our guys get to the rim off ball screens and rolls, and they did a good job on the ball screen coverages. Blitzing their five and switching their four.

Yeah, we would have loved to have gotten a few more paint touches, and yet when we got that ball in the paint they blocked it and changed it. We didn't shoot it very well from two either. You look at our shooting percentage from both two and three, we struggled.

Q. Bruce, at halftime what kind of changes did you guys make offensively, if any? And definitely shot so much better the second half.

BRUCE PEARL: Well, we decided -- kind of we put both Walker and Jabari a little bit more on the perimeter and rolled down our guards a little bit and try to play out a four-out, one-in and try to play out of space a little bit.

Yeah, I think the kids are confident in what we're doing. They just felt like we're going to start making a few of these shots. And obviously Wendell did and Jabari did. Texas A&M is a really good team.

Let me ask you a question, guys. You saw two good teams out there today, right? Two really good teams. I think our frontline with Walker and Jabari, pretty good, right? Ran pretty good. Those teams are pretty close in some ways.

My team won 15 games out of 18 regular season. Our guys did -- our guys did really, really well. They did. Had a hell of a year, because we're not that much better than the eight seed Texas A&M. We're better. We are.

But we played better all year long. I'm really, really proud of them. It was two pretty good teams out there. Texas A&M outplayed us, they were tougher than we were, and they made shots.

Q. Bruce, is that part of what you told your players after today in the locker room after you came back in? What did you say to them?

BRUCE PEARL: I can't tell you all that. I can't tell you all

that. (Laughing) I'll just say what I started off with, and it is: While it's okay to be disappointed and show some emotion and be upset, I wanted them to put something in perspective. We're blessed.

Like every one of them guys in the locker room, all the coaches, hopefully you folks here are blessed. And there's a lot of stuff going around the world right now that is difficult, so I want to make sure our guys put the loss in perspective, because they're still young people, and I want to be able to teach them that.

I want them to be grateful for the opportunities. Now, can we take advantage of the opportunity we put ourselves in? A chance to be a really good seed in the NCAA tournament.

I also told them that we're a tough team to prepare for because a lot of what we do is different, and once you go around the league a few times, it's a little easier to guard what we do.

So I want them to try to put a little wind in their sails heading into the tournament.

Q. Bruce, what was it about K.D. today for him to struggle so much? Something Texas A&M was doing on defense or just an off night altogether?

BRUCE PEARL: Once the ball is not going in, you know, and it's tough, and he had a couple of opportunities where he got by his man and got to the rim and got some shots blocked and didn't get -- didn't get himself to the foul line, which is something that he needs to do, right?

So I think -- I mean, I didn't think he took many bad shots. He might have pinched one or two off, but he just couldn't buy one.

Q. I've heard you say before that you look forward to the day that Auburn fans can come out like Kentucky fans do. They were out in full force today. I'm sure they're disappointed. What do you want to say to them?

BRUCE PEARL: Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity. You've asked two great questions. I talked to the players about that too. Did they represent their families? Did they represent their university? Did they represent the name on the back of their jersey?

In this one, how many cousins and brothers and friends traveled? Many of my players' families, that's a bite out of their budget to come to Tampa and spend two, three nights in a hotel. We feel badly. We feel badly for our fans that

came out in great numbers.

I think it does make a strong statement about this conference when a basketball program like Auburn's can travel like we are traveling. They love this team. Our fans love this team.

This team has given them a lot to love and a lot to support, so I know they're disappointed. But we feel a responsibility. We do feel like we let them down. Absolutely.

Q. When you hear Wendell Green say this is going to make us hungrier, and they take accountability into that, how important is that heading into March?

BRUCE PEARL: I think Wendell said that because it's what -- the right thing to say. It's something you guys will write. He is hungry. I'm watching TV. I'm watching other games.

When one team is pounding another team and executing, it's just so easy to go, oh, A&M wanted it more. Yeah, we came here. We didn't really want it. You know?

Or one team came ready to play. They brought the fight. And these are all really good -- you've got to say something. You've got to write something. You got to say something.

Give A&M credit. They played inspired. They played like their hair was on fire, because they're trying to get into the NCAA tournament. We wanted win this championship. We wanted to build momentum going in, and we got beat by a really good team.

But our guys are pretty humble and pretty hungry. We still are.

Q. You said last week we got to get hot now. That's the deal. A few years ago with the Final Four run it was sort of you went in hot to the NCAA tournament with the conference tournament. What are the challenges now of an earlier exit in the SEC tournament and trying to turn that into getting hot?

BRUCE PEARL: We've got to find a way to get the guys' confidence back a little bit with the shots. There's a reason.

Look, if you look at our percentages, our numbers in the league, defensively and rebounding and blocked shots and steals and pretty good in field goal percentage, assist-turnover ratio. We have great numbers.

Our three point field goal percentage is very low. Doesn't take a rocket scientist. The kids even said it. They said they kind of let us -- they kind of backed off, packed it in, made it really difficult for us to get to the rim or to get it inside because of -- and the only way you change that is by making a couple of shots.

And so we're going to see. We'll see more of that.

Q. Unrelated to in the game, before the game when you were handed the regular season trophy, you gave it right to Al. Was that something you thought about, or was that just kind of he was right beside you or you felt like since he is the oldest guy around, maybe that was something you did on purpose, or was that just...

BRUCE PEARL: Listen, I was in the second row. I don't need to be out in the first row. Those guys won the championship. I'm just glad and blessed that Auburn gives me the opportunity to be their coach, so it's a championship for those players.

Thanks.

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