

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday, March 15, 2024

Auburn Tigers

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Coach Bruce Pearl

Johni Broome

Chaney Johnson

Postgame Press Conference



Auburn 86, South Carolina 55

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Auburn. We'll ask Coach Pearl for a few thoughts on the game, then take questions.

Coach.

BRUCE PEARL: First, want to start with South Carolina and congratulate them on a phenomenal year. To be picked at near the bottom and to win 13 SEC games, that's a really good team. They're well-coached. They got a good plan.

I think the thing people are wondering why we were so excited about playing. I don't know if that should even be a question. We try to be always excited about playing, respect our opponent. We recognize that we need to make plays on both ends of the floor. We also recognize it's been since 2019 that we won an SEC game, in that time we won three or four, to win the SEC tournament.

Proud of our kids. Coaching staff did a great job of getting us prepared. Guys had a really good week. We're looking forward to the opportunity to play Mississippi State tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Johni, South Carolina went 10 of 30 at the rim against you today. They had a ton of points in the paint yesterday. What was the key to y'all's success at slowing them down?

JOHNI BROOME: Yesterday's game they scored 50 points in the paint. We knew we can't win like that. Our

front line takes pride in our defense. As you can see, on the defensive side, we held our own and stood our ground.

Q. Chaney, they got to within 35, 25, you went on a 5-0 run yourself. Talk about that sequence for you and the rhythm you guys were in.

CHANEY JOHNSON: I mean, it's easy to catch rhythm when I got a head coach and players that always believe in me, give me confidence. So, I mean, I'm not going to say it's not nothing. I mean, when they pushing me every day to be the best player I can be, always speaking positivity into me.

BRUCE PEARL: At least the assistant coaches are more positive (smiling).

Q. Chaney, last few games you're scoring nearly double-digit points a game. What's gotten into you on offense? What has been the key to this stretch?

CHANEY JOHNSON: I mean, my main goal is just to improve game by game. I ain't going to lie. I kind of ramped up my work ethic. I've been putting in a lot of extra. These games are really important. I know my team really going to need me. I just want to be the best player I can be for them.

Just trust in my work and trying to get better every game.

Q. Johni, three-point shooting has been a big thing for you down the stretch. What is the ceiling for this team when you continue to shoot like this?

JOHNI BROOME: Man, Coach always tells us now is the time to go on a run, make shots. That's how you advance in the tournament, in the NCAA tournament, how you win games.

I think everybody been taking pride in what he said because we went through a little shooting slump mid-season. I just credit all my teammates for being in the gym, like Chaney said, stepping up to the moment when the moment's getting big.

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Q. Johni, did you feel like you guys going into the paint early opened it up for the three-point shooting later? What did you see on the floor?

JOHNI BROOME: Yeah, for sure. Pregame Coach said inside-out. That's what he always preach. Get inside. They play one on one the whole game. When you got guys, our front line, like us who score down there, kind of hard. They started digging. We have guys like Denver Jones, K.D., Aden, Tre, they all can make shots. Hard to stop us when we start hitting shots.

Q. Chaney, you guys protected the ball well today. Only one turnover in the second half. Talk about what you saw out there that helped you?

CHANEY JOHNSON: I can just credit our point guards. I mean, they're great leaders on and off the court. I mean, one turnover combined for the whole team is crazy. That just is a testament to their focus and their mindset going into these games.

THE MODERATOR: We'll excuse the student-athletes and continue with questions for Coach.

Q. More of a general question. You've seen a lot of conferences, a lot of basketball in your life. How would you characterize the offensive might of this conference this year? How well does great offense translate into the NCAA tournament?

BRUCE PEARL: I don't know what the analytics say, but there are, like, four or five teams scoring 80 or above, right? Tennessee and Kentucky, Alabama, just incredible firepower. We're one of those teams scoring above 80, yet we're the most athletic team in the country. So it's physical. We defend.

I think our league is prepared to make a run in March, a bunch of us are. You saw Mississippi State beat a potential 1 seed in Tennessee start to finish. They finished ninth in our league. Arkansas beat Duke at home, finished 10th in our league.

I think we got some really good coaches in this league. I think that's sometimes a separator, is that coaches, sometimes how good they are on the offensive end can be a separator. I think some great coaching staffs in this league.

Q. Your best teams have been great defensively. If you had to put a finger on why that is, is it fundamentals? Scheme? Is it effort? What makes Bruce Pearl teams so good defensively?

BRUCE PEARL: I appreciate the compliment. I don't know that I agree with you, but...

You got to play with effort and energy. We're committed to playing 10 guys. When you play 10 guys, look at the stat sheet with the number of guys that scored, look at the balance. Look at all the guys that feel really good about the way they're playing and contributing. That's in that locker room. Those guys like each other, get along with each other, share the minutes. That allows you to not take plays off.

The deeper we can go in a tournament, the more advantage it is for us because of our depth, the effort, energy, the unselfishness it requires to play that hard. It's why Mississippi State won two games here. Mississippi State got down and guarded LSU and Tennessee. That's why they've advanced. Kind of let Hubbard make a few shots, totally do what he does. The rest of those guys are really good.

We had two great games against them this year, so...

Q. You talked after the Georgia game that depth was going to be the key for you to win the SEC tournament. You had 11 different players score today. Talk about the ability to be able to switch guys in and out and keep 'em fresh, keep South Carolina on their toes.

BRUCE PEARL: If you told me we'd have 10 guys score and that Jaylin Williams would only have three, I may be a little concerned (smiling).

Again, there would be a lot of guys that were Second Team All-Conference and a fifth-year senior that only got two shots, and they'd be all upset in that locker room. You would you would never know it from Jaylin Williams. He's excited about winning. He doesn't care. He was happy that Chaney Johnson came in there and did what Chaney did.

The depth of our front line, Chaney and Jaylin, Johni and Dylan, makes a big factor. We took care of the ball.

South Carolina doesn't turn you over much. They don't. In fact, they forced the fewest turnovers in our league. But they're super, super solid.

The other thing, too, this doesn't get enough talk. It's about matchups. I'm not going to tell you why it's a good matchup for us and a bad one for them. It just is. There's things about the way we play and they work that sort of works out for us.

We fouled them too much. We got to do a better job of



defending without fouling.

Q. You mentioned the matchup part. Two wins against South Carolina. Why have you been so good against South Carolina? Is there anything part of that that's tempo, or is it just the personnel?

BRUCE PEARL: It's a great question.

Honestly, it's almost like as an offensive coordinator, defensive coordinator, I want to dodge the question, but in truly answering the question, it tells you where I think we're strong and where we're weak. It's just kind of one of those things.

But, look, South Carolina man-to-man, as far as guarding one on one, they're really good. They guard the ball really well. They do play really hard, play physical. They play inside-out basketball.

We've got some size on the inside. They got the ball inside a lot. We have some size with Dylan, Johni, some fouls to give that made it hard for them to score at the rim.

Q. When you talk about the offensive firepower in the league, how much has the eradication of the charge this year been the gasoline on the offensive explosion?

BRUCE PEARL: It's been huge. It's been huge. I will tell you I did not like it when it first came in with the secondary defender couldn't come over and take a charge. I didn't like it because the timing of the rule change. In other words, we had already recruited our roster, then all of a sudden sometime in the summertime, we get a rule change.

What's happening is it's created a little bit more one-on-one basketball and a little bit more freedom of guys being able to get downhill. Once you get into the paint, you got to bring it because they're allowing the verticality, allowing the guys to be big. As long as they don't reach down and foul.

I think it's been a good rule. I think it has opened up the floor a little bit. It's brought a lot more contact at the rim with the bigs blocking shots. A lot of times those guys will turn the corner, get downhill, the collisions would be out there on the perimeter. I think it's better because kids aren't just jumping in front of each other. It has increased the offenses.

Q. So many teams with great home records this year, how important are these opportunities?

BRUCE PEARL: We had a winning record on the road in

the SEC this year. That's hard to do. We had some great neutral-site victories.

It does translate to I think success in tournament play. But we don't play a neutral site at Auburn. Did you see how many people were there for Auburn? Ain't no neutral site now. That's a home-court advantage for the Auburn Tigers because our fans traveled. I'm just glad they don't have to check out of their hotels tonight (smiling).

Q. Defensively, especially around the rim, what was the key for you guys to be able to slow them down?

BRUCE PEARL: We're built a little differently. I think Dylan and Johni, Chaney and J-Will are all older and they're all bigger, and they're willing to be physical and stuff. I mean, tomorrow, in the paint, some big men down there tomorrow on both teams.

South Carolina had it. Murray-Boyles is going to be a pro, going to be a great player. You could just see in this particular game, like Johni, tonight he had the advantage. Johni was excited about playing him because if you look at the last six games, Boyles is shooting 75% from the field in the last six games. He was 1 for 9 tonight. Give our guys credit because he's a terrific player.

Q. 42 points in the paint. You talked about matchups. Talk about the importance of not settling for jump shots today, what you saw from your team in terms of ball movement?

BRUCE PEARL: I tell you what, you're getting better. That's a good question (smiling).

There's a temptation to settle because South Carolina does such a great job of sinking and stripping and ripping on penetration, things like that.

We had a little wrinkle in today that we hadn't run much this year. We had run it a lot last year. Steven Pearl and Mike Burgomaster -- by the way, Steven Pearl had an amazing scout today. He didn't miss on anything. He's had South Carolina, and he was all over it. We were so prepared.

And then Burgo had a bit of a wrinkle in something we run all the time that was really effective early getting downhill. Hadn't run it yet. We ran it last year. It definitely helped us get downhill, which then set the tone for not settling and getting to the rim.

Q. How big was it for them to get off to a good start with no turnovers?

BRUCE PEARL: That's what I was looking at on the stats.



No turnovers from our point guards.

Those guys, they don't get as much credit as what they deserve. Look, Aden Holloway is a dangerous offensive player that's worked really hard to improve on the defensive end. You have to game plan for him. Tre is just super solid. You could see how well Tre plays with Dylan because he got Dylan in the air on a couple of occasions. They've done a nice job of working together.

Tre is sort of backing with that second group. Aden plays a little better with the first group. But South Carolina doesn't turn you over. Mississippi State are going to get up in our shorts a lot more.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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