

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 16, 2024

Auburn Tigers

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Coach Bruce Pearl Chad Baker-Mazara Jaylin Williams

Postgame Press Conference

Auburn 73, Mississippi State 66

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Auburn. We'll ask Coach for a few opening remarks action then take questions.

Coach.

BRUCE PEARL: I'll start off by congratulating Mississippi State on a great regular season and a great post-season run. To just imagine that that team has as many quad one wins as they already have. They've beaten the best teams in our conference. Close to Kentucky. They beat Tennessee twice. They beat us. They've beaten Florida. Chris Jans is a great professional. His teams play so hard, so physical, so tough. He's a good dude.

I know he looked down there a couple times, he knew we were just doing what we had to do. We have great respect for one another because both our teams play hard. I like his team. I like the way he coaches.

It was a rock fight because both teams were playing really, really physical. That's Mississippi State's MO. Our MO is playing hard all the time, not always quite as physical. They beat us on the boards, but we hung in there. We hung in there. I thought that was really important.

Our balance really, really paid off. I thought Jaylin did a tremendous job on Matthews in this game 'cause he's a real factor. I thought our five men, to only give Tolu three baskets, really significant we were able to kind of defend Mississippi State on the inside. Was a big factor.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for either of the student-athletes.



Q. Jaylin, second half rebounding, a lot better. What changed? Did you make an adjustment?

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: Man, we knew they was dominating us on the offensive glass. I was like, let me just jump up, use my athleticism, go grab the rebounds. That was really key. At halftime we talked about that. They had more offensive rebounds than we did rebounds total.

We had to put our pants on, go out there and show them Auburn basketball.

Q. Jaylin and Chad, Mississippi State came out and threw the first purge early on. What did it take for you to adjust to their style of play?

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: I knew, like, they played before us, so they done played a couple games before us. I knew coming out they were going to try to be more physical than us. First half they had to stick around as long as they could, compete at the highest level as possible. They knew they were tired, probably didn't have as much rest because they had to prepare for us the whole night. This morning we had to play at 12:00.

We knew they was going to come out the gate, be physical, Mississippi State, which is one of the most physical teams in our league.

We had to adjust and respect them, but we had to play our game at the end of the day.

CHAD BAKER-MAZARA: Basically we knew it was going to be a dogfight. We played them twice. We already seen what they're capable of. So we just had to come out there and basically execute. Coach told us what it was going to be about. SEC tournament, not many foul calls. We knew it was going to be really a war down there, so...

We basically came out and listened to Coach, stick to his game plan and just executed.

Q. You had a nine-point lead, they cut it to one. Dylan Cardwell gets a dunk off a great feed for you, blocks



the athlete, gets another dunk. It changed the whole momentum. Talk about that minute of the game.

CHAD BAKER-MAZARA: To be honest, that was really a game changer. I feel like that gave us a spark, to everybody. Helped us, like, get the crowd involved, too. It was a really big play.

He came in, basically came in clutch, turned the whole momentum around. At that point, they came from a nine-point lead. I feel like that really helped us a lot.

Q. This is your first win by single digits all season. What do you think you can learn from that down the stretch?

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: Make free throws and rebound really. Especially when it's that close, we're up like that, they're going to foul us, then we got to get stops, communicate, stick together. Like, we can't shut down as a team.

That's what we did.

CHAD BAKER-MAZARA: When it comes to games like that, basically it comes to who wants it more. A little 50/50 plays, going to make the extra hustle, the one more pass, who's more disciplined at the end.

I feel like we, how he said, stick together and we know we're going to have to take it out from there, we're not just going to walk in there and get a dub.

I feel like we stayed together at the end and stayed composed and came out with the dub.

Q. Jaylin, you had 15 assists on 25 made baskets. What is the secret to be able to distribute the ball like that?

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: I had a couple bad turnovers 'cause I didn't realize how long they were on the perimeter from the get-go.

Everybody on our team can score the basketball. We all trust each other in any position: perimeter, inside. Especially like Johni and Dylan and me inside, and you got Chad and Aden shoot the ball well outside.

Very hard to pick who to guard. Move the ball around, somebody is going to get the best option eventually.

Q. I want to ask you about the budding rivalry between Mississippi State and Auburn.

CHAD BAKER-MAZARA: I mean, we know that they have

really great players, especially in the backcourt. We know that our guys are better. We never underestimate them. Every time they come, they give us a good game, a good fight. We just really come out there and just play harder than them and try to out-execute them basically.

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: Mississippi State, again, they play harder than most teams in our league. They gave us a lot of things to look at on film, what we need to get better at as a team.

Playing against those guys the last five years, they've been playing really hard, really good games against them. Sad that it's over because I learned a lot from playing against those guys because they play really hard.

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

Q. Going back to the discussion about matchups. You're getting killed on the offensive boards early. Made some adjustments. What did you tell your team? What did you see? How did you make adjustments?

BRUCE PEARL: What we talked about originally was the bigs are going to have to keep their bodies on their bigs and the guards are going to have to rebound down.

When you play against Mississippi State, it's not just that. It's going to take multiple efforts. The bigs have to hit and then chase down loose balls because there's not going to be a clean one.

I just thought early we were slow to do both. You're going to get in a ball screen. You got to hit Hubbard and not let him turn the corner, then get back to Tolu. It just takes multiple efforts. I thought early on we weren't giving that kind of effort on the rebounding.

Q. How big was depth in this game? Was that true in the second half?

BRUCE PEARL: Yep. We're a program that's committed to playing 10 guys double-digit minutes. We're a program committed to playing our stars sometimes under 30 so that we can be fresh in March and be fresh in the end of the season, at the end of games or the end of halves to be able to make runs.

It's like to have guys like Chaney Johnson or Chris Moore, K.D. Johnson, Dylan Cardwell coming off the bench, just having confidence in those guys, not dropping off, being different. How many effort energy plays did Chris Moore make? Then Dylan Cardwell, yeah, it's hard to have Johni Broome out of the game late, but Dylan was such a factor

defensively. I wanted to give Johni a quick blow to kind of end it. He comes out there and switches on Hubbard, blocks a shot, gets the dunk.

I just don't think a lot of backup centers are going to be in there at that time. We believe in the sum of our parts.

Q. First single-digit win of the year, what did you learn? Maybe not a bad thing they had to go through something like that in the post-season?

BRUCE PEARL: It was really good. I got to tell you, I thought Chad Prewett, Corey Williams did a really good job with the scout, the preparation. It is a limited play call list 'cause most of what we do won't work because of the way they guard. I mean, 73 points was hard (smiling).

It was good to be in a close game. I thought down the stretch obviously we didn't turn the ball over late, and we made our free throws. Got the ball to Jaylin Williams, Chad Baker-Mazara, and they did a great job closing it out.

Q. Second-chance points huge. They had 10 in the first half. They had zero till the last few seconds on the dunk. That had to be big for your team.

BRUCE PEARL: Yep, it was. I think the guys talked about it a lot at halftime. Tendency to succumb to fatigue, the physicality. It was a tough game to work from the standpoint of keeping the game under control. Both teams playing really hard, really physically.

Q. How have you seen Chris sort of develop in his years with you? What does it mean to have a player that's kind of willing to take on different roles, change positionally?

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah, man, Chris Moore started for us most of the year because he was one of our best teammates. He's a hard-working, great guy. Let me bring Chad Baker-Mazara off the bench, gave us firepower off the bench.

Dylan Cardwell, a four-year guy with a chance to be back for a fifth-year. Jaylin Williams, a fifth-year guy, the winningest player in history of Auburn basketball. Chris Moore, a four-year guy. You don't see that anymore in college. That's your culture. That's your chemistry.

We have to continue to find ways to recruit guys that want to be part of a family, grow and develop, and have their roles change. It requires some unselfishness.

We can do it at Auburn because our kids love Auburn. They're not just out there, they care about the name on the

back of the jersey and the front of the jersey when you go to Auburn. It's just true.

They've got a loud voice in that locker room, even some of those guys coming off the bench. Chris brings physicality, brings toughness. He brings respect. Made some big shots tonight. He lets a guy like Chad, who is clearly a more talented player, not have to play 32 or 33 minutes, withstand four fouls.

Q. You mentioned after the Georgia game the first game in the SEC tournament will be the hardest, that it gets easier. You're one game away from the title. Have you taken a look at Texas A&M and Florida?

BRUCE PEARL: I'm laughing because I was obviously wrong. The toughest game wasn't the first game (laughter). That doesn't have to do with our opponent. We played really well against South Carolina.

We lost at Florida. We beat Texas A&M at home. We only played each team one time. I thought that the four teams remaining were the teams that played as hard and physically in this tournament as anybody. I think those four teams, Texas A&M and Florida, same thing, in the matchups leading up to this.

They're different. They're both really different. We've got groups of coaches that have had the different scouts. So I've got two groups of coaches that are going to be on Florida, going to be on Texas A&M. I'll work on us for about an hour or two till the game is over, then shift gears and meet with the team tonight at 8:00, give them a bit of a preliminary scouting report, let them get off their feet. 8:00 tomorrow morning breakfast and another scout.

We'll probably have two hours between now and the game time with our team. That's just about going out there and playing. There's a lot on the line tomorrow. Opportunity for anybody here to make really, really some kind of special history. We're still in position to make history.

Q. You mentioned scratching and clawing for 73 points. 86 yesterday. Two good offensive performances against two different types of defense. What about your unit is it that they're adaptable?

BRUCE PEARL: Good question. Texas A&M tomorrow, with all their switching, all their changing of defenses, they're hard to play call against. Florida, with all their size and length. What a matchup this is going to be now of great guards. You got four of the best guards in the league in Florida, Texas A&M going at each other.

Either way it's going to be a really hard game. Tomorrow is



going to be another hard game to score. We'll have to figure some things out. While we're trying to figure it out, we better get stops.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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