

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Saturday, March 16, 2024

Florida Gators

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Coach Todd Golden

Denzel Aberdeen

Will Richard

Postgame Press Conference



Florida 95, Texas A&M 90

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Florida. We'll ask Coach for some general thoughts on the game, then take questions.

Coach.

TODD GOLDEN: Obviously I'm thrilled with the way our team performed today. I think this was a great example of the growth of our team and our program over the last couple months. To go down 18 in the first half, find a way to come back and win by 5, it was just incredibly resilient.

I was just really proud of the way that we maintained our composure when things weren't going our way, and our belief didn't waver. I think that was something that showed the growth I was speaking about earlier in terms of where we've come from earlier in the year.

Will hit free throws down the stretch, did a great job of taking care of the ball against the pressure. Denzel, a breakout game for him. Will can tell you he plays pretty dang well in practice every day, does a great job of being consistent, having a great work ethic and attitude. I'm really proud of Denzel for stepping up in this moment when his teammates needed him the most. We don't win this game without him.

Good job, Denzel.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Denzel, we heard all year about how you've performed in practices. What was it like to have that

translate into a game finally?

DENZEL ABERDEEN: It felt great. My teammates always believed in me throughout practices, games. Just saying, Keep going, keep going. Without them, this wouldn't be possible, putting me in the right spots, always believing in me, keep my head up.

Just go out there and have fun, just be ready for whenever my position is called. Just go out there and play hard, do that.

Q. Will, can you comment on Denzel's performance.

WILL RICHARD: Yeah, I'm proud of Denzel. I mean, he's one of the hardest workers I know. You never hear him complain about minutes or anything. He just stays the course. He works hard. He kills it every day in practice.

I'm not surprised to see him come out here and do this. We're proud of him. Everybody believed in him. We knew he could do it. I'm just proud to see it come to fruition.

Q. Denzel, with how A&M plays defense in doubling the post, did you feel as a three-point shooting guard it could be an opportunity to hit some from deep?

DENZEL ABERDEEN: Definitely. Tyrese, Condo and them, when they was getting trapped, I just told them in the huddle to look out for the skips, and me and Will on the other side was being ready for shoot. That comes from practice, we always rep those out. We was able to hit them today.

Q. What clicked when you started to come back? Anything in particular?

WILL RICHARD: Yeah, for us it was just like getting adjusted how the game was being played. We know they're a physical team. I feel like we came in a little too lackadaisical. For us, how the refs were calling the game and stuff like that, just make sure we limited their free throw attempts. For us, getting back to what we wanted to do in offense, transition, clean rebounds, play how we play.



DENZEL ABERDEEN: Coming together in that second half. No one put their head down. We were all together. We just said we have to fight to come back the second half, do everything we had to do to come back. That's what we did.

Q. Once you had the comeback, you had to show the poise against their pressure. A week ago in the same city you didn't really have that. What was the difference this time?

DENZEL ABERDEEN: We went into practice after that same game talking about it. We just repped like staying strong, holding the ball strong, trying not to get no turnovers or nothing. Yeah, that's what we did.

WILL RICHARD: Like Zel said, we came into practice and focused on it. Just practiced it in game reps. It paid off today.

Q. You were both part of the program last year. Can you speak to the progress you feel you've made as a team.

WILL RICHARD: Yeah, for me it's a whole different energy with just being a part of this team. I feel like everybody has bought in. Everybody wants to be here. Everybody has one goal, and that's to win. We're doing whatever it takes to do that.

DENZEL ABERDEEN: Same like Will said. Everybody this year has brought in, all put together, and we all gel together very good outside of basketball. I think that's a big part. When we come in, we fight for each other, know what we have to do for each other.

THE MODERATOR: You're excused, and we'll continue with questions for Coach.

Q. To make the SEC title game in your second season, for Auburn to be the opponent specifically, does it mean anything to you for that to be the team?

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, I mean, I would be lying if I said I would not -- would prefer it to be somebody else. But to meet them in the championship, it's going to be just an awesome game and a great opportunity for us.

Neither side will be taking it easy on each other. Obviously they've had a great year. They have a great team. We played very well when we played them the first time. We had them at home. Obviously it's going to be a tougher challenge now in a neutral court.

Both of our programs, obviously they've been established,

and now we're becoming that way. We're trying to get there and stay there. Both teams playing really well at the right time obviously. I think tomorrow will be a great game.

Q. In the same Auburn vein, you mentioned the first game. What do you think you did well that gave them fits?

TODD GOLDEN: We had them at home. We played fantastic at home all year. We had a bye that week. They were coming in, I think they beat Alabama by 18 right before they played us. We had some things going our way in regards to just the lead-up to the game.

We played with incredible energy and enthusiasm. I thought our guys did a great job executing against Auburn. We did a really good job defending them, limiting their opportunities, their catch-and-shoot threes. We did a good job on Johni.

Offensively we were playing with great pace and great intent, just getting down the middle of the floor, attacking the rim. We made a lot of shots that night. We played one of our best games.

We should have some confidence in the sense that we've performed well against these guys. I know they will have a much better effort tomorrow. They'll have some different things for us that we'll have to adjust to.

When you make it to the championship game, you're going to be playing a really good team. That's just the way it's going to go. Just excited to get out there again tomorrow.

Q. You were down 18 points. What were some of the adjustments you made offensively to start scoring?

TODD GOLDEN: We might not have been scoring great. I think the issue in the first half was the way we were guarding. We weren't guarding physically at all. Quick turnaround obviously. I didn't think we executed very well in terms of what we wanted to do defensively in the first half.

Then credit to A&M, they shot the ball really well. Six threes in the first half. They've been playing at an elite level the last five games before this one. A big part of that is their perimeter shooting.

When they make threes, they're really, really hard to beat. They have those really good attacking guards in Taylor, Radford, with Obaseki stepping up. He's been playing a lot better lately. That gives them another element, makes them harder to guard.

I think our defense sparked us in the beginning of the run, get out in transition, get easier baskets. In the second half I thought we did a better job of getting the ball side to side, making them guard the whole floor. Our bigs did a good job of slipping out of the ball screens, caused confusion, let us get downhill.

We did a great job of playing off two feet, not over-penetrating and then looking out, and then obviously we shot the ball really, really well today as well, which was the difference in the game.

Q. With over 30 free throws attempts for both teams, did you feel that was a little bit of the matchup, or is that tournament time?

TODD GOLDEN: I think stylistically both teams get to the line a lot. A big part of our quick turnaround scout was simply we got to do whatever we can to keep 'em off the line. Obviously we didn't do it very well. We were able to get there also.

They're physical. They put a lot of pressure on the rim with their high ball screen penetration. Like I say, with those three guards, they get downhill, get in your body. It's hard to defend them without fouling.

I was hoping that we'd have a better advantage at the line. It didn't work out that way. Both teams were really, really efficient from the line. They shot 81%. We shot 77%. The difference, again, we made 14 threes, they made eight. That was really it.

Q. What about Tyrese today? He was very athletic on both ends of the floor, played 28 minutes. Felt like it was one of his better games.

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, I thought a little bit slow start. He was close to dominant in the second half, just the way he was able to play in the paint physically. He did a great job passing. They trap a lot in the post. I think he's one of the better passing bigs in America and composed. Double-teams don't really bother him. He's able to stay calm and look out. He did a great job finding Zel for three, Walt for three, skipped one to Will early on.

Those plays are backbreakers. When they're trying to run a specific style defensively, you're able to get open shots against it.

Again, him and ZP, being the senior leaders of this group, I thought both stepped up in a big way to help us win tonight.

Q. You've been pretty adamant this year Denzel was

going to keep playing no matter his production. How rewarding was it to see him play?

TODD GOLDEN: Very. He's a guy that we have a lot of belief in. But his practice production just hadn't translated to games the way we expected it to. Big part of what we believe is that practice matters a lot. Guys that perform every day and do their jobs and perform well, which he does, that eventually you gain good belief and good confidence from that, start showing up in games.

We probably expected this to show up closer to January for him. Again, he didn't get discouraged, he didn't change his approach. He's been coming on the last couple weeks. He played really well against 'Bama at home. I thought he played great last night in short minutes.

Today I just felt like he earned the opportunity to be the first guard off the bench, see what he was able to do. He obviously took advantage of that opportunity today.

Q. With Taylor and Garcia in foul trouble, does it make it easier to bend the game how y'all want to play it?

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, I mean, those guys are both really impactful players. I mean, Wade Taylor still played 34 minutes. He was out there quite a bit. Garcia, he was limited. Although he doesn't score a lot, I think he's very impactful with his defense, rebounding, his effort on the floor. So having those guys, specifically Garcia, not out there as much helped our cause.

I thought Washington was good, hit some shots during our run, to keep them in there. But yeah...

Q. You mentioned progress this season. Where do you feel you took the biggest step?

TODD GOLDEN: I felt like we would have a pretty good team. Obviously we had some kind of fluky situations in non-conference, with ZP missing the first three games, because he played in Portsmouth. Micah sprained his ankle in the first play, in the Pitt game. We don't have him against Pitt, Baylor or Wake Forest. We had guys in and out of the lineup a little bit.

We were good, but we just weren't super connected yet. We knew we weren't playing to our ceiling. Obviously started 1-3. Not exactly a great start. When we won at Missouri, then came back and won those two against Mississippi State and Georgia, we started to get some confidence.

I think we went to Kentucky and won right after that. When we got that win at Rupp, I think that was kind of the

moment where everybody in the program, specifically the players, were like, We feel like we can play with anybody anywhere, beat anybody anywhere.

The reality since then is we've played really dang well. We've lost a couple, but had leads in every game. Obviously coming here, winning three so far speaks to that.

Continuing to be more connected. We have a lot of new guys. Riley and Will are the only guys that really played for us last year that are still here. Denzel obviously was in the program. It's not that easy to just assemble a group and expect to play at a really high level right away.

I feel like we've done a good job of continually getting better as the year's gone on. This is the right time to be playing our best basketball.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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