

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Sunday, March 17, 2024

Auburn Tigers

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Coach Bruce Pearl Chad Baker-Mazara Johni Broome

Postgame Press Conference



Auburn 86, Florida 67

THE MODERATOR: We're ready to continue on with Auburn. We'll ask Coach for some general comments, then take questions.

Coach.

BRUCE PEARL: A couple things. Before the game, Coach Golden came to my locker room. We had a little exchange. That rarely happens before a basketball game. 'Cause sometimes that's sacred space. But Todd knew that he could come in and we could hug each other, congratulate each other on being in the game.

Weren't looking forward to playing against each other. Neither one of us wanted to be the gracious loser. I'm just so proud of Todd. What a great team. That's a really, really good team. Their fourth game in four days could have been a factor. So congratulations to Florida on a tremendous, tremendous season.

The markings of a great program, the character and culture of the players. These guys have been really easy to support, all right? They have been really easy to support. Johni could have gone anywhere in the country, could have left a year ago. Wanted to graduate, be an Auburn man. I know he's glad he did, because he did it for his family but also for Auburn.

Chad, taking advantage of this opportunity. Sometimes young people just aren't as grateful. Part of the reason why I got emotional is I'm just grateful, blessed. I love that about our team and I love that about our guys, right?

Winning the championship this year means even more

because the league was so good. I was telling Garth before, I told my son, we won a few of these. I think this one is the most special. Maybe it's because it's in my 10th year here at Auburn or because the bond that this team had. I wanted it really badly for these guys, or maybe just the fact that this league was that good.

Proud of my team.

Last thing, my coaching staff. Our staff was amazing. To have three preparations in three days, to be spot on with what needed to be done, the guys locking in. Johni came in and practiced this morning. I won't tell you exactly what he said, but it was wake the...up, and let's get to work.

When your players are doing that, they know. He knew when he went upstairs to go to bed, he knew where his coaches were. When you got up this morning, where were the coaches? In the room trying to get them ready.

It's a beautiful thing when players and coaches respect each other and know that they could not accomplish it without each other. Could not accomplish it without each other.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll go to questions for either of the student-athletes.

Q. Johni, can you put into words, you came to Auburn, you wanted to win a championship, how do you put it into words?

JOHNI BROOME: First and foremost, I got to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Without Him giving me the opportunity, this platform, I wouldn't be here. I'm a believer. I think the Auburn family has a good culture. I knew that coming in.

We playing for a coach, BP, the staff we have, the players that we have, the bonding that we have, the chemistry that we have. It just makes it more special. I wanted it for myself, but I wanted to see the smiles on my teammates' faces and my coaches' faces because we worked so hard to be here.

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Q. Florida made the run in the second half, cut it to a 45-44 game. Then seems like you kicked into another gear. What did you see on the floor that allowed you to turn it on?

JOHNI BROOME: Basketball is a game of runs. But it's about how you respond. You got to take the punches, but you also got to give some back.

I feel like we came to the sideline. It was their run, it's time to make our run now. We went on a run and never looked back.

CHAD BAKER-MAZARA: How he said. It's a game of runs. At the same time, of course, there's a four-day playing. I feel like at that point, when they made their run, we had fresh, new guys come in. I feel like the guys who came in just turned it up a whole different notch. We executed, stayed calm, stayed composed. We stayed composed, came out there, executed.

Once we figured it out again, we didn't let down.

Q. Johni, you seem to take exception with the narrative that Auburn couldn't win away from Neville. What does it mean to be able to come in here and win straight games to take home a championship?

JOHNI BROOME: I mean, that wasn't Neville, but if you look around, that was Neville. The Auburn family, they're going to come support. That's what they did.

I met a couple fans in the hotel lobby at 8:00 this morning. I was still half asleep a little bit. They were like, We heard you guys, we came up here this morning. It's like, dang, they came down here to support us.

Just to go out there and hear the claps and the congratulations, it's special. We have the best fans in the country. I believe that. I thought we showed that today.

Q. Chad, before the season, there was questions about whether or not your game would translate to the SEC. Now you've made the All-Tournament team. Take a look back and how do you feel about the moment for yourself?

CHAD BAKER-MAZARA: I mean, I know people, some people, didn't believe in myself, but I did. I've been playing Division I before. This is not my first time. I played against top Power Five schools. The coaches and the players, they all believed in me.

I know it took me a little time to transition a little bit because it's a faster game, better players. But once I

found myself, my role on this team, the guys accepted me and just helped me out how to get it within the offense and defense, basically just everything clicked in together.

Even Coach believed in me even more helped my confidence. I had to just come out there and do what I did my whole life: play basketball.

Q. Chad, you were FaceTiming your family. Anything you want to share what you told them, what they told you?

CHAD BAKER-MAZARA: So, yeah, I was on the phone with my dad. Sadly he couldn't make it up here today. I was just showing him that I made the All-Tournament team. It was a special moment. I know they're super proud of me and very happy. I just wanted to share a moment with both of them because I miss them.

Yeah, it was just a little family moment going on, just showing them what was going on.

Q. Even near the end of the season, you have shown an ability to adjust how the game is being called. What is it like being out there, trying to play without fouling?

JOHNI BROOME: Yeah, we got to adjust to the game. Every game is going to be the same way. That's why this team is so good, because we can adapt. If y'all want to have a shootout, we can have a shootout. If your guys want to rough it up a little bit, play more physical, we can do that, too.

Yeah, this team is special. I think I give credit to my coaching staff because they prepared us for these type of things. They prepared us to be able to score high numbers and score the ball or to sit out and guard and get stops.

CHAD BAKER-MAZARA: I feel like when you have a 10-man team, really 11, but when you have a deep team, we all bring different type of things to the table.

How Johni say, you want to rough it up, we can, because we have the pieces to do that. You want to have a shootout, everybody on our team can shoot. We dictate the game for us. We just come out there and just listen to the coaches and just execute their plan.

Q. Bruce is the first Auburn coach to have won this tournament twice.

JOHNI BROOME: There you go, there you go (smiling).

Q. What makes him special, sets him apart?



CHAD BAKER-MAZARA: Something that really makes Coach special is that he's one of them coaches, because I've been to a couple schools, but he's one of the coaches you can go, sit down and talk to. I've been to a couple places where you can't really do that. Here you can really have a conversation with Coach about anything, especially basketball (smiling).

He's a great mind. He knows where to put you in places to succeed. I feel like he deserves that because he really puts in the work. I see him every day stressing. I have to come out there and be like, Coach, calm down (smiling). But I love him because he's always working, first one in there, last one to leave.

He's really just a great, amazing guy. I'm glad we helped him accomplish that.

JOHNI BROOME: I never told him this before, but when he recruited me from Morehead, he called me, I realized I was talking to Bruce Pearl, I got a smile on my face. Bruce Pearl is really calling me right now (laughter).

BRUCE PEARL: Then they got to know me and they knew better (laughter).

JOHNI BROOME: He's one of the best coaches, if not the best coach, in college. To me he's the best coach I ever had. I had a couple good coaches. He's a player's coach. He can relate to you. Like Chad say, we've had plenty of conversations, not about basketball. He want to see how the family is doing.

Basketball-wise, you talk to him as well. If I have a problem with something or he sees a problem, we have a good relationship so we can talk. We talk about what I'm doing good, what I need to improve on. I feel like that's why I came to Auburn.

We're SEC champs.

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

Q. A little over eight minutes left in the game, Jaylin Williams goes up for a dunk... You called a timeout. What was said after that because that's when you went on the run?

BRUCE PEARL: I wanted to break the momentum. I thought Florida could potentially go for another run. Fatigue was a factor, it being their fourth game. I didn't want to have many stoppages in play. I debated it.

I thought they missed it, so I wanted to let it stew for a little

while. It was a big miss. We just didn't want them to go on a run. I didn't want to give Florida that momentum, you know?

We got organized and settled down a little bit.

Q. Yesterday you asked for the Auburn family to come up and show out. It sounded like Neville Arena today. What impact did the Auburn family have today?

BRUCE PEARL: Yes, thank you for that question.

I've got respect for the history of basketball. The SEC tournament for years was Kentucky's spring break. That's what everybody knew it as, whether it be Atlanta or Nashville. I admire that.

When I was at Tennessee, we traveled some. This is different. I keep telling people, Auburn is really a special place. We're an everything school.

We put the call out. We were playing for a championship. You don't play for a championship very often. It's a Sunday. Most of the people in Alabama are in church on Sunday morning. Thank goodness, because they have their phone, you can now watch church online.

So all the Auburn family got in their cars, they drove up north from north Alabama, central Alabama, south Alabama, they put Church of the Highlands on there, they put Auburn Community Church on there, and they put their church on there, and they watched and listened. I'm sure they asked the Lord for some favor, which I don't often do, but I actually did a little bit today.

No, it's great. It's the reason why College GameDay has been at Auburn four years in a row. It's the reason why. You need to almost make that statement to the SEC office and to the leadership there, that when they see that, they recognize that we've got a great program.

I don't know what it does, but I want Auburn to be one of the better programs in the SEC. I want our commissioner to believe that. I want his assistant, Garth, to believe that. And I want our fans to believe that. I want to believe that.

The only way you can really do it is by consistently being competitive, honoring the way the kids play, hard, the right way. Just look at this arena. Very important.

Thank you for the question.

Q. One of the things statistically that may get lost is Florida averaged 23 three-point attempts per game. What was the idea going in and not only stopping the



three but stopping the attempts?

BRUCE PEARL: I think part of it was four games in four days. Florida had three great wins. The teams they played against to get to the championship game... They played great basketball. I'm sure fatigue was a factor.

When Micah goes down, that hurts their depth even more.

I will just say this now, guys. That arena got quiet. Both teams came over to the bench and both teams got in a prayer. My team pastor, Jeremy Napier, prayed with tears. He came from Marshall where Micah was playing, knew Micah and knew the family. He was praying. We were circled up.

That's the SEC. That's folks down here in the South. I wish there were more places in the world like it. But I hate that the young man got hurt. Again, it's a testament to our fans and the respect we have amongst our programs.

Q. We've talked a lot about matchups, about how Auburn has matched up with their opponents. We also talk about the balance of minutes you like to play. Chris Moore has given you great minutes so far. Talk about his contribution.

BRUCE PEARL: I don't think Chris would mind me sharing this with you because it's just true. He's such a great competitor. Obviously a four-year guy. You don't see many of those guys around as much anymore.

But Chris wants to win so much for everybody else. He wants to please so much for everybody else. Sometimes he puts so much pressure on himself that he wasn't playing the game, he wasn't playing with confidence because he didn't want to let everybody down.

I said, Chris, this is a game. A game. Have fun. It's okay to make mistakes. And because you are putting so much pressure on yourself, you're right, you're not playing well. You're right.

Because I moved Lior Berman ahead of him. I said, Chris, you're going to get another shot at this. You are.

He said, Coach, I know I am.

I said, Just remember don't be afraid to fail. It's okay.

Man, he's playing hard. He's playing physical. Listen, he never lost his voice in the locker room. He never lost respect of the players even when he was on the bench and he led from the bench with his attitude.

He would have been fine if Lior Berman was out there playing today. He would have been the first guy off the bench. He saw his opportunity and he took advantage of it. You have to be ready when your opportunity comes. If you fail, just learn from it. You're going to get another chance. What would you do differently this time? I think right now Chris Moore is doing things differently.

Q. Jaylin, a guy that has been here for five years...

BRUCE PEARL: He's won championships before. I think this probably means a lot to him because of him being a senior, a graduate of the university. He obviously is really important.

I like to think our front line is as good as anybody in college basketball. When you talk about Dylan and Johni and Jaylin and Chaney, those four guys together. Again, don't forget one of the things, you look at the stat sheet, they got to play the most minutes of the game for us with Johni Broome at 24. Everybody has double-digit minutes. The fewest minutes played was 15 and change.

You heard the guys talking about the willingness to share it. A lot of guys want to play 35, they want all the shots. That's fine. That's fine. But it doesn't always translate to winning and it doesn't translate to having a great locker room.

Q. We let the players brag about you for winning the tournament twice. What does it say about you and the program and your staff?

BRUCE PEARL: I kind of appreciate the question. You got to be a servant leader. Obviously leading by example. The thing they both talked about, I am there before anybody else. But I'm paid to be there before anybody else. They also know that I don't always get it right. They know I make mistakes.

But I think they know I'm doing to it the best of my ability. I've got to overcome some of the crazy things they do, some of the decisions they make. They got to overcome me, too. We forgive each other.

I thought Johni Broome was particularly locked in today. Didn't have a great game yesterday. We talked about it a little bit. He was accountable for it. Mississippi State was double-teaming him. Tolu had one foul the whole game. Johni was in foul trouble.

Sometimes the kids get sensitive about that stuff. I think he kind of learned from it. We hung in there together. He's shown great leadership.

Denver Jones could have easily been on that all-tournament team. Do not sleep on Denver Jones. I told him after the game, Thank you for your patience. Because, again, he was the leading scorer in his conference a year ago. He's our best, I'd say, defensive guard. There are lots of things he could do better, but he can really score. He's playing great right now. What a tremendous piece.

I thought our young point guards both played well. Didn't turn the ball over well. Both Tre and Aden made some shots that made a big difference. Again, they're both sharing it. I'm sure they would each like to play 30 minutes, everybody would like to start.

I guess it's very much the sum of our parts.

Q. This system that you have, has it been seamless all year, easy, an adjustment to get to where you are now in terms of these guys being so selfless?

BRUCE PEARL: It's been a career of double-digit minutes for 10 guys. If you look at my numbers over the career, 9 or 10, sometimes even 11. Dr. Tom Davis was my mentor. Back in the day we would run and press. You can't ask kids to play as hard as we play them and play them all game long. They're going to take possessions off.

We talk about that in recruiting. Sure, there are still challenges. There are challenges during the course of the day about get me the ball. Johni wants the ball. He wants to go down there and score because he knows he can. He also knows that the other guys also are out there.

Chad Baker came off the bench almost all season. And then when Lior got hurt -- actually, that was Jaylin Williams got hurt. We lost Jaylin. Jaylin was out with a knee for a couple games. I needed Chad in the starting lineup to give us a little bit more offensive firepower. He should have been starting all year. He was the better player.

We brought him off the bench. He never complained about it. It's enabled us to start better with having a little bit more firepower.

It's give-and-take and it's open. They understand where they're at. They understand why they're there. They do understand what their roles need to be.

Q. You talked all post-season about your biggest asset was the depth of this team. How did the depth of this team help you win the SEC title and moving forward?

BRUCE PEARL: I think obviously you look at the shared

minutes and the shared roles. But the biggest thing is I told the returning guys, You're going to like Chaney Johnson. You're going to want to be really good friends with Denver Jones. You want to play point with Aden Holloway out there as your point guard. Chad Baker-Mazara is special. They're all good guys. Going to fit in.

To get those guys, you know what I told them, You're going to like playing with Johni Broome. You will never meet a better man than Dylan Cardwell. Chris Moore is as tough as they get. Jaylin Williams, as unselfish as they get. Tre Donaldson, a hard worker. As a result, we get what we deserve sometimes in terms of making the decisions of having the quality.

Then there's staff. Who do you surround yourself with? You want to judge me? Start off by judging me by my wife first and foremost. Judge me by the company I keep. I'm willing to be judged by my staff. I've got as good a staff as there is in college basketball.

By the way, Steven Pearl had South Carolina. His team of coaches, Chad Prewett, Corey Williams, their team of coaches, had Mississippi State. It just worked out that Ira Bowman and Mike Burgomaster with their team. I split my staff up in threes. We had three fantastic preparations.

I tell you, as a head coach, I've got to do each one of 'em. Coming into those meetings after a victory, you got to get me on Mississippi State quickly because I got to get it to the team. My staff did a tremendous job. The players did a good job going to work.

I asked them this morning. Yesterday we were a little rushed. We had 8:00 breakfast. I said, I need another half hour, 45 minutes. What do you guys want to do? They said, Let's get up earlier, meet at 7:15.

I said, We can stay at 8 if you want to, have a little less time to rest before the game.

They said, No, coach, let's get up earlier, get our work in, take care of business.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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