

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Thursday, March 12, 2026

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Bridgestone Arena

Auburn Tigers

Coach Steven Pearl

Tahaad Pettiford

Sebastian Williams-Adams

Postgame Press Conference

Tennessee 72, Auburn 62

THE MODERATOR: We'll start with an opening statement from Coach Pearl, then take questions.

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, it was a tale of two halves. I thought that was one of our best efforts defensively this season in the first half. Did a lot of really good things. We flew around. We were active. Did a great job executing. Some of our ball screen coverages.

They only shoot five throws in the first half. They had four offensive rebounds. We did a lot of things that I thought were really effective in the first half.

In the second half, they shot 27 free throws. They did a good job attacking the rim. I got to go back and watch the film and see what we did defensively that led to those free throws.

But we out-rebounded them by one. I thought their physicality really bothered us offensively in the second half. I think we let it affect our defense as the game went on.

So, you know, guys battled. Did a lot of really good things. 16 offensive rebounds. We just had too many turnovers. 12 turnovers, offensively, we can't do that. It led to transition. There was a stretch there in the second half where it felt like missed shots around the rim and turnovers led to transition for them. I think they had a bunch of those points off turnovers in the second half.

Proud of my guys for how hard they fought, how hard they fought all year. We just weren't able to execute down the stretch. Got to credit Tennessee for a lot of things they did.



THE MODERATOR: Questions for the players.

Q. Tahaad, what do you think the biggest issue was for y'all in that run on offense?

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Just us letting our defense take over our offense, not being able to get stops during the run affected our offense coming down and just being careless with the ball, careless turnovers, missing shots that sometimes you might knock down.

We let our defense affect the offense in the second half.

Q. Defensively felt like y'all held up in the first half. Did you see anything kind of different in the second half? What happened there?

SEBASTIAN WILLIAMS-ADAMS: From my perspective, I think, A, we got disconnected a little bit defensively. I mean, there were some times where I felt like first half we covered for each other's mistakes. Second half is more like, You got it.

That's really the only difference I noticed.

Q. Tahaad, you've been asked this question a lot, but what would be your pitch about why this team is still an NCAA tournament club?

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Just knowing how hard these guys worked every single day. Our record might not show it, but I know these guys are ready to play in the March Madness tournament. If we get the chance, we're going to show it.

Q. Tahaad, 72 hours between now and the selection. There's going to be some nerves. How do you plan on spending that?

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Just waiting to see. I'm just going to relax, get off my feet. Get back to Auburn and reset with the team. If they call our name, we'll be ready to go by next week.

THE MODERATOR: Gentlemen, thank you. We'll take

questions for Coach Pearl.

Q. 20-0 run, offensively what do you think caused y'all to have the kind of execution issues you hadn't been having earlier in the game?

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, their physicality really bothered us. We just didn't do a good job finishing around the rim. I think it was eight and a half minutes we were in the bonus with 12 minutes left. We went eight and a half minutes without drawing a foul. When you go on a run like that, it's really part of what we try and do to break up runs is to get to the foul line. I got to go back and watch the tape. Eight and a half minutes against a team that's as physical as Tennessee, that's something, so...

Yeah, I thought we had some sloppy turnovers in that run, too. I want to say we had seven second-half turnovers that led to points in transition. We dribbled into their help too often. Didn't play off two feet as much as we should have. We settled for some tough ones.

We let their physicality bother us and throw us off our spots. That's what that team does very well. That's why they're such an effective defensive team.

Q. If you guys are not selected, have you had internal conversations about whether you'd play in the NIT or...

STEVEN PEARL: No, have not. If you look at our résumé, if you compare us to the rest of the teams on the bubble, which I'm happy to go over all these notes with you, we deserve to be in the tournament.

I'll just go on a rant then.

Here's the thing. What people have to understand is, like, it's my job to fight for my team. It's my job to be my team's advocate. It's my job to speak about all the things that this group's done.

Some of the biggest things that we're told to do in scheduling, especially during football season, is to get some of these prime time matchups for TV ratings, to compete with football. That's why we play teams like Houston and Purdue and Arizona, we go to the Players Era. We do all those things.

So we scheduled a really hard out-of-conference schedule. We had some really quality wins in that streak. If you look at -- this tournament is a team of who you can beat. If we're going to look at six teams on the bubble right now, Texas, SMU, VCU, Miami Ohio, Missouri, New Mexico, we have more top-25 NET wins than everyone in that group but Missouri. We have more top-50 wins than everyone in

that group. We have two top-25 road neutral wins, more than everyone else on the bubble. We have more wins over the projected field than anyone else on the bubble.

If you look at the major metrics that they use -- NET, KenPom, KPI, Strength of Record, and Wins Above the Bubble -- we are better than every team in that group in at least five out of the seven categories, and in a couple of them six of the seven.

Our strength of schedule, overall we're at three, and out of conference we're in 15. If you look at the rest of that list, they're far below us as far as the schedule that we played.

We did the things that were asked of us in scheduling. With 10 new guys, that was probably a little aggressive on our part with nine underclassmen. Our guys have some of the best wins in college basketball. This team deserves to be in the tournament.

It's a team that can win games in the tournament. I think they've done enough ultimately to have their name called on Selection Sunday.

Q. Do you have any issues with how that game was called in the second half? Handful of instances that didn't go the way you thought they might go.

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, I mean, we're in the bonus with 12 minutes left. Eight and a half minutes without a foul called, that's tough because that's a really physical team and they do a great job defensively. They do a great job of getting vertical at the rim.

I thought a couple times we did a great job of using shot fakes to draw contact. There was contact on a few of those three-point shots.

I don't have a lot issues with the calls that they got on the other end because we fouled them. We got to do a better job in those situations of not fouling. I thought there were a couple inconsistencies.

But here's the thing. They have a hard-ass -- sorry. Sorry, John. They have a hard job. It's a really physical game. It's a really fast-paced game. We have the best athletes in all of college basketball who make crazy plays. The alley-oop in transition that Okpara sprinted back and blocked. Was there contact there? Sure. That's a hell of a play. A hell of a play. Not many leagues where that play is being played.

It's frustrating. I'm going to fight for my guys. We're a team that's fifth in the country to get to the foul line. Two of our lowest free throw rates have been against Tennessee.

They do a great job in those two games of guarding without fouling.

I thought there were a couple situations when the game got tight where I thought our guys did the thing we asked them to do offensively.

But we can't let that affect the next play. I thought we did that a little bit too much in this game.

Q. Was it a case of Tennessee just adjusting and tweaking some things in the second half?

STEVEN PEARL: Every time they got into a ball screen, we basically trapped it until Gillespie gave it up. We hadn't done that all year. I'm watching film of Vanderbilt and Tennessee last night. We need to do more of this.

We had done that a lot this year. You saw it against Mississippi State with Hubbard. We kind of thought it would be effective in this game. It really was.

Anytime you do that, they throw the ball to the big, you got to make Carey, Okpara, Estrella and Brown make plays. That's kind of what as a defense you want to make them do.

In the second half they didn't run any ball screens. They ran pin-downs, isolation. Ultimately that led to them getting to the foul.

Coach Barnes made great adjustments at halftime. I knew he would. Our adjustment was going to be switching everything. If you do that, they will just post you up and they'll get the offensive rebounds. If you go zone, which we did, we had a couple good possessions, but we weren't able to get the offensive rebounds on those possessions.

They did a good job of spreading us out, making us guard one on one. We had too many breakdowns in the second half. They went away from ball screens, which was really effective.

Q. Long 72 hours until Selection Sunday. How are you going to handle these next three days? Watching games or...

STEVEN PEARL: I'm going to break down this film and just get to work, start prepping for the next game. That's really all we can do as coaches. We just got to continue to pour into these kids because, man, we've put 'em through a lot this year. This team has dealt with a ton of adversity.

I'm not going to say 'not a lot'. None of the teams in the bubble, they play our schedule, I really don't think they're

going to have performed as well as we did this year. I just don't. I'm just going to fight for my guys on that. I'll stand on that.

So I'm going to watch this, break down, see the things we did well, didn't do well. We'll get back to Auburn, we group, see what the committee decides.

Q. I don't follow your team closely on a daily basis, so I apologize. Rick Barnes had some pretty flattering things to say about your team. You've grown up around those coaches. Now that you're interacting with them as a peer, has that dynamic changed? How do you think you've been accepted this year?

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, I mean, I'm not sure what he said, but Coach Barnes is one of the greatest coaches in the history of this game.

I played at Tennessee for five years. I put a lot of time into that program. I poured a lot with my work and everything I could do to try and help that fan base be proud. I'm really happy that Coach Barnes got that thing in a position and a place that it is right now.

In my shoes, you look down the sideline, it's Cal, it's Barnes, it's Todd Golden, some of the best names. Then you look at our non-conference, Kelvin Sampson, Matt Painter, Steven Pearl is on the other end. It's crazy.

Coach Barnes is a competitor. We've had two hard-fought games against them. He knows what it looks like better than anybody. Hopefully the people that are making these decisions heard some of the things that he said. We have a team that is capable of winning games and deserves to be in the tournament.

He's been a great friend to my dad. They have always been very close. He's been a great resource to me. I have a lot of respect and I appreciate Coach Barnes very much.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

STEVEN PEARL: Thanks.

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