

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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## Auburn Tigers

### Bruce Pearl

#### Men's Media Day Press Conference

**Q. Coach, going into this year, do you as a coach, you've been doing this for a while, do you look at rankings going in with recruiting, or with the SEC media you guys are ranked in the top 5. Does that matter to you and your players? It's a long season.**

BRUCE PEARL: I've always been better as the underdog. I remember in 2018, they picked us -- CBS had picked us to go 4-14 in the SEC, and we opened up at Tennessee on the road, and Tennessee was a team that was going to factor for the championship. Somehow I got 4-14 up on the scoreboard, and I talked about that.

I thought we were -- I did think we were better than that. That team I think went 14-4 and won the regular season championship, picked almost last. So I'm way more comfortable in that role.

I saw the way it was ranked out, and I thought it was pretty close. I thought we were somewhere between 4 and 7 with a high being 4, and I think that's what you'll see.

You're in the top seven teams in our league, you've got a chance to be in the top 30 teams in the country. When we were trying to develop the program and grow the program, the rankings mattered in recruiting. There's so many other factors in recruiting right now, rankings don't matter nearly as much.

You look at it, and the key is are we good enough Sunday to win an opponent, and from that point forward, are we going to continue to get better. If we do, we've got a chance.

**Q. Coach, obviously losing Jabari and Walker, there's no replacing those two guys specifically, but how are you going to try to replace the production that they gave you, both on the offensive and defensive ends of the floor?**



BRUCE PEARL: The greatest thing about Walker and Jabari is they both were humble and hungry, both just wanted to get better, they both wanted to win championships, they both wanted to be great teammates. That's all they cared about every day.

They were pros, and they were great kids. That's the culture we have.

I've got to tell you, replacing them with Johni Broome and Yohan Traore, I don't know how we could do any better. My coaching staff did a great job, not that either one of them are either one of them right now, but really, really good players, really good prospects, great kids, and so they'll fill in some of the minutes.

But Jabari was the third player taken in the draft. Walker was the National Defensive Player of the Year. I don't care who we would have recruited.

It really in my mind boils down to how much more did everybody else improve. How much better is Wendell Green and Zep Jasper, K.D. Johnson and Allen Flanigan, Chris Moore and Jaylin Williams, Dylan Cardwell and Babatunde. That's going to be, in my mind, what's going to make up for not having two first-round draft picks.

**Q. Just a question about what did you feel like you learned from your team and the experience that you all had over in Israel, both on and off the court?**

BRUCE PEARL: Well, you know, it was an amazing experience. I love the fact that the NCAA allows us to take these trips every four years. I look at Coach Brady out there, and I'm sure that he could tell you about some amazing opportunities that they've had.

One of the greatest things I've ever done in coaching is every four years take these foreign tours. They're educational. They learn their history. They learn so many things about the world, and then all of a sudden we get a chance to play a little basketball and practice, and they also get some exposure with maybe some foreign teams and some international basketball opportunities.

I think it's a great thing. I think that, quite frankly, we



should expand that August basketball period. I think it's a real opportunity.

You look right now at what live television is doing in America -- football hasn't started yet; hockey and basketball, all that stuff is over. You've got baseball, you've got golf, you've got tennis -- they're looking for live programming. Why not have an August window of a few games, whether it's here or whether it's internationally? I think it would be great. Tie it into some NIL opportunities, and I think the networks would really enjoy it. It would be something sort of after the summer and before the fall. It's a great experience.

And by the way, as far as Israel is concerned, one of the top countries in the world as far as basketball. A lot of -- Richard was talking about the fact that he played in Israel for three years for Maccabi Tel Aviv. That's an amazing trip that I'm going to continue to try to get other college teams to go on, because you guys know I'm of my faith, and Jerusalem is God's holy land and a very, very special place for all the world's religions, Abraham being the father of all nations, and why not bring your kids back there and see where it all started.

We've got some teams that are interested in going back again next year, which I'm very excited about.

**Q. Todd earlier from Florida was talking about you. Tell us a little bit about that relationship and when you found out he was taking the gig.**

BRUCE PEARL: There are certain topics that I get talking about that I get emotional about, like all of a sudden turning a light switch on. I get a little Dick Vermeil in me. When you mention Todd Golden, it almost immediately begins to trigger like if you ask me about my son, Steven.

It's emotional. I love Todd. I love him like a son. I am so proud of him for the coach that he has become, the father that he is, the man that he is. So glad that he's in the league.

I think our league did a great job this year hiring some incredible, young, talented, up-and-coming coaches, and it'll be all -- he'll be all I can handle as far as what they do and how they do it.

It'll be a great challenge, so I'm proud of him. I'm happy for him. Florida made a great hire.

That's a place now that expects to win championships, at Florida, because whenever obviously Coach Donovan was there they were winning championships, and Mike was very successful at Florida. Not as successful as Billy, but I

would take Mike's record at Florida. I would take that record and be okay with it in the league.

He's following a couple of really good coaches.

**Q. You got Wen with you today. How much have you seen him grow in offseason into being a leader for this team both on and off the floor?**

BRUCE PEARL: You know, Wendell put together some incredible numbers last year. His assist-to-turnover ratio was a national leader, and obviously he's got great, great range. You know, he started out as a mid-major player at Eastern Kentucky, and we didn't have to beat a ton of high majors on him because he's 5'10", 5'11", and he's undersized.

But Wendell is not undersized in any other way just in where he lines up. He's got great confidence. He makes other guys better. He's dangerous on the floor. And the biggest thing is just physically he's gotten stronger, and defensively he needs to bring it every possession because there's not a lot of margin for error. He doesn't have a ton of length.

There's certain things like sitting in a 2-3 zone or switching a lot defensively which is really great to do and hard to go up against. I don't have that luxury because I could have two six-foot guards on the floor a lot at the same time.

**Q. In this era of recruiting, what are the first three or four questions that prospects ask you now?**

BRUCE PEARL: Well, I mean, we've always focused on, number one, the Auburn family and Auburn culture and our university -- quality of our university, the fact that our student-athletes are graduating and coming out and being successful. People love Auburn that go there. They just do. Our kids, we don't have a lot of guys that want to transfer because they like Auburn, not just because they like playing for me, it's a great, great place. So we still recruit to that culture.

There's a lot of places they can get the basketball, but if they want the whole, the full monty at this about developing themselves as a student-athlete, that's great. We talk about winning championships. We've won three in the last five years in the SEC. We talk about advancing in the tournament, and we talk about sending guys to the pros. We've had, I think, five or six guys in the last five or six years that have been drafted and are having great success. So when you put that all together, that's kind of what we're selling.

Obviously there's going to be questions about the support.



Every game is sold out. Try to buy a single game ticket to an Auburn basketball game. Go on StubHub. Compare that to buying a single game ticket to another facility in the country. I'm not so sure that our single -- you can't get in. You can't get a ticket.

So the environment is great.

Obviously we'll get questions about the NIL, and we have to be competitive in that arena to be able to maintain -- all my rosters have been pre-NIL rosters, and this will be a look at the first post-NIL roster. Of course, as we continue to move forward, we've got to continue to do a good job in that area.

**Q. You kind of beat me to the punch on summer basketball, but I'll ask you about one of the other big ideas for the sport right now: Expanding the tournament field is getting some chatter. Where do you come down on that?**

BRUCE PEARL: Whatever they decide. It's almost like the rules committee, whatever they decide. You want to keep it where it is, I'm fine with it. I have no problem with expanding it. So I guess I would then be for expansion.

I think what I would do is I would look at the other sports and I would look at what percentage of the other sports teams have an opportunity to be in postseason. I think in men's basketball, it's a lot less than it is in some of the other sports.

I know you just had Buzz up here before. Had Texas A&M, if they were the last team that weren't in, that was a team that you didn't want to play at the end of the year because at the end of the year they were playing as good as anybody. It's just like Ole Miss in baseball last year. They were the last team in, and they win the National Championship. Those are two pretty good arguments to be able to maybe -- maybe it's time we expand it.

I'm always, when it comes to rules, what's in the best interest of the student-athletes. If more student-athletes get an opportunity to play in that NCAA Tournament and have that one shining moment, I am definitely for it.

**Q. You talked last March, you said the SEC was going to get crushed from critics because they didn't have a lot of teams advance in the NCAA Tournament. Given how far some of these programs have come, is it almost reasonable to say instead of just talking about we're going to get six or seven teams in, that we've got five or six or seven, who, if things fall right, they could go pretty far in the tournament?**

BRUCE PEARL: I don't think I could sit here and predict who's getting in and how far they can go, and I don't know if this is true, but I've experienced this myself. When you're in a league like we were in last night and you're competing for an SEC championship, it is a grind.

The year that we went to the Final Four, we finished fifth in the SEC. I don't think we underachieved, but we didn't overachieve. At the end of the year we kind of like, man, we're a pretty good team, what do we got to show for it, and then we got hot at the end of the year. We won the last four regular-season games, we went to the SEC tournament in Nashville, won four games, and then we won three -- I guess we had to win four games. So we were 12-0 in March.

So I'm not going to make any excuses for last year, but I think when you're in a great league and there's a grind in that league -- I think sometimes, you look at football, if you look at -- to SEC football, to go through SEC football every single weekend, there are no weekends off in SEC football. There aren't many off at all now in basketball. There are leagues in this country, other leagues in this country, other Power Five leagues, there are a couple weekends off.

They're pretty excited about playing an SEC team. We get to -- in football. We get there, and it's hard after you've just played Alabama or Georgia or the other teams that are really, really good.

So I think in some ways the quality of our league kind of beat us up. Last year the ACC had a great NCAA Tournament, unbelievable, great -- what a run they had. The league wasn't as good top to bottom. It wasn't. So therefore I think some of those best teams in our league, they were pretty excited about getting into that tournament. And they showed it.

**Q. I was reading that I guess Allen Flanigan took a leave of absence, now he's back and he's competing with another Arkansas kid. How is Allen doing? How good is it to have him back? What do you expect from him? Chris is a guy that hasn't played a lot of minutes, but it sounds like you're high on him, too?**

BRUCE PEARL: You know, our basketball team's great strength is I've got 13 really good players. I really do. There is great competition and depth at every position.

If I had to put out a starting five right now, I could tell you that really truly there's only one position of the five where I know who's going to start. That means the other four right now are up in the air. It's pretty close to our first game, which tells you we've got great depth, and there is great competition.

So we'll be learning an awful lot about our team as we go. So Allen and Chris, they're right there. They're neck and neck, and they're battling it out. One is going to start and the other one is going to come off the bench and the other one is going to end. So they're both going to play.

It's great to have him back healthy, and he's physically healthy. Allen Flanigan is one of the best athletes in the SEC, trying to become one of the better basketball players in the SEC. I mean, he's big, strong, fast, physical, skilled, and just going to translate, use that athleticism and have it be where he can be productive.

That's a very important -- his athleticism, his power, his strength, very important part of his game, so him back healthy is good.

**Q. Kamani Johnson from Arkansas was flashing back to that game last year, the celebration, the atmosphere, and he said it was like crossing an item off your bucket list. What does that say about where Auburn basketball is today?**

BRUCE PEARL: Wow. Obviously that's a great compliment to Auburn and Auburn basketball when we get to go to Arkansas and play in that historic building and that historic town for great college basketball and have that be a bucket list game.

Again, I go back and look at Coach Brady, and I know he played against some pretty good Auburn teams, but that wasn't a game he had circled on his calendar. So if we have got a few teams in our league that are looking at Auburn as a game they've got to get to advance, that's why I came to Auburn.

Look, it's easier to get it going than it is to keep it going, and we'll see if we can keep it going. But it's a great compliment.

That was the hardest, toughest environment that we had last year, was at Arkansas, and we played great. We played great. I don't think Arkansas had a field goal in overtime, and I'm not so sure they had very many -- how many field goals can Arkansas have in the last overtime and end of regulation?

**Q. What is the practical application of NIL in the college basketball arena? Because we're only a few years away, removed, I guess, from the FBI investigation into that, paying of players.**

BRUCE PEARL: Well, one of the great things about NIL -- I'm going to tell you a great story, true story. I get a text

from K.D., and you all know me and K.D. have got this very special relationship. He's my maniac, not anybody else's. He texts me and he tells me how much the relationship matters to him and how much he appreciates the fact that I've always had his back and that I let him be him and he's got my back. It was wonderful.

I immediately, after getting that text message, call my son and said: What has he done, and what haven't you told me he has done?

He's like, Dad, I don't think he does -- I don't think he's done anything wrong.

It was then that I realized that he got his first NIL check. Probably the biggest check he's ever gotten in his life. I don't know. I actually did wind up asking him what was that all about, and he said that was it. So now what he was able to do for himself and his family was significant.

So I know we got problems with the consistency and things like that. Stories like that that are true stories are why I think NIL is a good thing. We've just got to figure out how to manage it. It's new, so we're all trying to get a hold of it.

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