

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

Tuesday, October 15, 2024

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Auburn Tigers

Coach Bruce Pearl

Men's Media Day Press Conference



BRUCE PEARL: War Eagle!

Thank you, Commissioner Sankey. I feel like I just got here, and I'm already the cagey veteran. There are also many conversations that I'll remember having with the commissioner, with Commissioner Sankey, and some of those conversations had something to do with the privilege of being able to coach in the SEC, with the confidence that Commissioner Slive put in me in allowing me to return back to the SEC after I lost my job at Tennessee.

So I do have a level of responsibility to sort of hold up my end for the league with our success and how we try to run our program.

I'm grateful to be a part of this league. I can tell you that it has never been better, the commitment across the board, the quality of the coaches, the passion of our fan bases.

I remember being in the league at a time when you could go on the road and there were three or four places in the league where the gym was half empty, and now almost every game is sold out. That's so good for the league. So I'm very pleased to be a part of it.

Q. Coach Cal has kind of become synonymous with Kentucky basketball the last 15 years. How do you foresee that changing with Mark Pope? What do you know about Pope, and what do you think about his success moving forward?

BRUCE PEARL: I think there's two things that jump out at me: One, how much better is the league with John Calipari at Arkansas and now Coach Pope at Kentucky. I can tell you from watching his BYU teams, he's got a brilliant offensive mind. That doesn't mean he's not a good defensive coach, but he is next-step European, the latest and the greatest offensive schemes that are out there right now.

Obviously was a great player, loved Kentucky, and from what I have experienced so far and what I've known about him, he's a really quality person, like the foundation of who he is and who he wants to be and how he wants to lead. I think Kentucky got themselves a great coach, a great person, and somebody that understands the history and the responsibility of leading that program.

Q. I feel like we ask you this every year, but this state is so healthy in basketball. You guys won the SEC, now another year Alabama makes a run in the Final Four. What can you say to that?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, I think the coaches at Alabama, the coaches at Auburn literally have taken on that responsibility. We have enjoyed living in the shadows of some of the great football programs that we've had over the years, but rather than focusing on that, we've embraced that and recognizing that if we can do it in football and if we can do it in baseball and golf and women's sports -- we are an everything conference. It just means more.

The second best conference in America isn't even close to the SEC in all sports. Men's basketball wasn't there on a consistent basis. So I'm proud of both Auburn and Alabama for representing the state of Alabama and playing quality basketball, and we hope that as we start this season, we can live up to those expectations.

Q. When you look at your non-conference schedule, I think I saw yesterday four teams in the KenPom top 10, you're their toughest non-conference game, Houston, Purdue, Iowa State and Duke. What does it mean to have Auburn to that point where you're playing that kind of non-conference schedule? Did you think when you got to Auburn 10 years ago that you'd be at this point?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, two things jump out at me. Number one, you'd better be careful what you wish for. We've got all we can handle for sure. But it's what we built. It's what we worked. It's easier to get someplace than it is to stay someplace. So to try to stay competitive at Auburn has



been a great, great challenge, and we've managed to win four championships in the last seven years, two regular season and two tournament, with four different teams.

Sometimes you've got to act like you belong, and you can't always control the recruiting, you can't control the transfer portal, you can't control a lot of things that are happening, but you can control who you schedule. And just the fact that Kelvin Sampson thought enough of Auburn's basketball program to want to get involved in that neutral neutral game or that Matt Painter, coming off a National Championship game, thought that bringing Auburn back to Indianapolis in a year was going to be a game that they could draw, so on, so forth. It's what we've worked for.

I just think from the standpoint of our players, I think our players deserve the opportunity to play against the best and have that great, great challenge. Adversity doesn't always build character, but adversity will reveal character.

We're going to have some adversity. We're going to lose some games in non-conference, perhaps more than we have in the past, just because of the strength of the schedule. How do we handle that? How do we bounce back? What do we learn? And obviously getting better throughout the season.

Then also if you look at the SEC-ACC matchup, the fact that Alabama and Auburn are both going to North Carolina and Duke and a lot of responsibility in those two matchups because those are going to be two of the hardest games in that matchup, and so I will wear the responsibility of trying to uphold our end, knowing the challenge of going to Duke.

Q. Obviously everybody talks about all the change in college basketball, but you got Johni Broome and Auburn both benefitting, he got extra year, he got -- could make some money without having to turn pro before he was ready, before going to the league. How mutually beneficial was that situation for you?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, I think when you talk to our guys about the NIL situation, our guys are truly grateful. They're able to do things for themselves and for their families and for their communities that they never dreamed of doing while they were still in college. In this time of a free market economy and this opportunity, obviously this is what the market says that these guys are worth.

I can just tell you that our players are grateful. They really are. So regarding Johni, he had an opportunity to probably go somewhere in the second round, maybe late second round, and be involved in a two-way contract and fight his way up to the big club, so on, so forth.

And certainly oftentimes when you make that jump when you're younger because the opportunity to at least get a decent contract and get started, well, now the NIL can put him on an equal playing field with that early NBA stuff and he can finish his degree.

How about this: Auburn basketball has graduated 40 student-athletes in the last 10 years. Auburn basketball has graduated 32 African-American men in men's basketball in the last 10 years. So when the commissioner introduces me and talks about the tenure at Auburn, okay, I'm so proud of that fact.

Part of it, our players love Auburn. They want to be Auburn men. They want to stay and finish their degrees if they can. If there's one thing I'm concerned about with the transfer portal is every time somebody transfers, they don't always transfer all those units when they transfer, and we're not talking near enough about graduation rates.

Now, I'm glad there's freedom of movement, but I am not for transfers every single year. I think it teaches the kids to flee, not fight, and I don't think -- the numbers will speak to themselves, we're not graduating near as many of the student-athletes as we used to graduate.

Q. Factor in what you just said about the transfer portal, your tough schedule, you bring a heap of knowledge when it comes to basketball IQ, but do you have to change the way you coach now when you think about everything you just mentioned?

BRUCE PEARL: That's such a great question. I'm too old to change the way I'm going to coach. I think young people still want to be held accountable. They want to be disciplined. They want to be challenged.

I'll tell you what they don't want to be, they don't want to be lied to. If you can tell a recruit the truth in the recruiting process, we may not always agree on everything, but I think student-athletes will be loyal. But sometimes in recruiting we tell them things that aren't true to get them, and then they get there, it's not what they thought it was going to be, and that happens sometimes.

But I don't think I'm going to change. I want coaches and I want players that want to play for me. On average in the Power Five conferences over the last five years, about four kids are transferring per year in the Power Five. That's way too many. At Auburn we're about two. So we're far less than the Power Five. But it's too, too many for me. I want to bring these guys in, I'd love to try to keep them all, and I won't change my coaching, but I will have to adjust to the rules and recruit accordingly.

Q. Coach, why are you so inviting to young head coaches and assistant coaches that might be seeking advice from you?

BRUCE PEARL: You know me to be inviting, do you? I've heard a lot of things about me; that's not necessarily one of them.

Well, I remember back when I was obviously in their shoes, and it's funny because for those of us that are -- all right, I'm 64. I can remember myself a lot longer being a younger man and a younger coach than I can remember myself in the last 10 years. Everybody kind of remembers me the last 10 years or so.

So I still feel like a young coach. I still feel like I'm new to the SEC, when I know it's sort of at the -- I'm clearly on the back nine.

I'm a teacher. This is what we do. So I'm always happy to share with all coaches things about our profession and things about teaching and the responsibilities that we have educating young people and the differences that we absolutely can make in people's lives, in players' lives, for better or for worse.

When I screw up, and I've screwed up, it's very embarrassing, and I let a lot of people down. There's a responsibility. At the same time, I'll do everything I can to try to do positive things.

Q. Bruce, Denver here today, can you talk about his transition to being more of a combo guard, playing the 1 for you, how much you've seen him embrace that role this season?

BRUCE PEARL: When we talked about it in the spring, it was something that he wanted to do. It was something that I thought would be good for him and for us.

Just technically speaking, it's easy to get the quarterback the ball. The quarterback has the ball. He then either has to hand it off or he has to throw it down the field. He has to do something with it to get it to one of his play makers.

So when you play point guard, the ball is in your hands. I don't have to do anything to get him the ball, and I think Denver makes good decisions with the ball. He can score, he can get downhill, he can make tough twos, he's unselfish. And I think it's really good for us, and I think it's going to be good for his future development.

I would venture to say that the most challenging thing on the basketball court is playing point guard and another position. That's really challenging. You can play center

and power forward. You can play on the wings. But the responsibility of -- I still want him to be aggressive, and I still want him to lead the team.

I think Denver has had probably as good an off-season as any of our returning players, and I think he'll be able to handle some of those responsibilities at point guard. JP Pegues will also play the position. Tahaad Pettiford is going to play some of the position. And we're going to have a brand-new point guard, and we're going to have 75 percent of Auburn's backcourt play at 1 and 2 are new players, with Miles Kelly also from Georgia Tech coming in.

Q. You're one of the great college basketball coaches of all time. Now, that also means that you've been around a while. With NIL and the way -- some of the factors also involved, what's it like to be in this league where Kentucky is eighth in the SEC?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, I appreciate that. I don't pay that much attention to that. I do think it speaks to the depth and breadth and the quality of our league, and I told the guys after a difficult practice the other day, I said, You guys want the good news? Auburn basketball could be one of the top 30 programs in the country this year. We could also finish 10th in this league, especially if we keep practicing like that.

So therefore what are you going to do? You've got to bring it every night. You've got to beat everybody on the schedule that you're supposed to beat, and you've still got to pick a couple off that you're not. I would imagine that Alabama is pretty good. I know they're picked 1, and they're awfully good. They deserve to be picked 1, I believe.

But I think the league is probably going to beat each other up pretty good. So handling losses, getting to the next play, getting to the next game is going to be really, really important. The league has never been stronger.

Q. Just wanted to ask you over the last few years, you've had quite a few transfers who have come in and not only make an impact but return for a second season in the program and beyond that even. How important is it when you are able to land a transfer who has multiple years of eligibility to get him back in your system where now he can become a leader after being that initial transfer guy to plug into a position of need?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, that's part of the coaching philosophy that I hope doesn't change with NIL and transfer portal, is that oftentimes a second season can really bring out the best, I think, in a student-athlete.

They've gone through the experience. They've had it. They've had the good, the bad, the ugly. It's new. When the season is over, they get to kind of break down what they did well and what they needed to get better. They've got the off-season. Then the second season they're just so much more comfortable in that situation.

That's, again, part of the reason why I don't like the one year, one year, one year transfer situation.

I think one of the advantages I have at Auburn is that our kids like it. They like it at Auburn. That's one of the reasons we've graduated so many players and the kids want to stay there and finish their degree. They love the way they're treated. They love playing in sellout crowds every single night at Neville Arena. And we hope we can continue to not have to continue to re-recruit an entire roster every year.

Q. We were very proud in the Rocket City of the relationship that we've got with Auburn basketball. Denver Jones has had a great run, but I want to ask you about Chaney Johnson and how much he's improved. He learned under Jalen Williams, one of your favorite players. How much better can he be this year? We hear he's 6'9" now.

BRUCE PEARL: I don't know how tall he is, but I know for his size he's a terrific athlete. He played the 4 spot. I don't know if you want to do the research on this, but I know there are so many great 4 men at that position in our league. Every night he's going to be going up against a great player at the 4 spot.

And a reminder, a year ago Chaney was playing Division II basketball at North Alabama. He came in last year, got his feet wet, absolutely looked like he belonged. Just needed more of him, just needed a little bit more aggressiveness on both the offensive and defensive end. He's going to be a terrific contributor.

I would look at Auburn being very similar to a year ago. Our greatest strength is going to be our depth. We are going to play 10 guys double-digit minutes, and when we go to our bench, we're not going to drop off, and who and what and when and how is going to be something that's going to be a work in progress throughout the season.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports