

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Auburn Tigers

Coach Steven Pearl

Men's Media Day Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We welcome Steven Pearl to the podium, head coach at Auburn.

STEVEN PEARL: Good morning. Thank you all for being here.

It's quite a feat, considering where the SEC was when I was a player, it was very top-heavy, you'd get four teams into the NCAA tournament every year. To really watch the progression and grow from my time at Auburn, it went from a league that got three teams in 2013 to obviously having the greatest season in the history of college basketball, the best conference in the history of college basketball. Obviously two teams in the Final Four, a national champion in Florida.

Their leadership has taken this conference to different heights.

I want to thank John Cohen and Djenane Paul and the rest of our administrative team and leadership at Auburn University for giving me this, allowing me to have this honor of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lead this proud program.

The staff is the reason why we're still here. We have one of the -- if not the greatest staff in college basketball. It's a staff that has been together for close to eight years almost, a majority of it. A staff that's won five SEC championships, been to two Final Fours, and since 2014 we've graduated 48 student-athletes, which is unheard of in this time of the transfer portal. We're incredibly proud of that. That's one of our goals moving forward, is to continue to grow that number.

These first three weeks have been drinking out of a fire hose. For me, I've had the fortune of watching B.P. do this for 30 years. The day-to-day stuff really didn't surprise me. I knew what I was getting into.

Obviously with a change like this, the first thing that goes through your mind is your players. What's best for them? For all 12 of our young men on scholarship to ultimately decide to stay at Auburn, it's a testament to Auburn and how special the place it is. It's a testament to their teammates and the relationship that they've really garnered together this summer. It's a testament to our staff and the relationships they have with those players and the recruiting process.

I don't know if any of you have seen our non-conference schedule. It's an interesting one, to say the least. Our guys came to Auburn knowing that this was what they were stepping into. They're incredibly excited about the opportunity. They're looking forward to the opportunity to show that Auburn is still a team to be reckoned with.

It's a group that has continuously gotten better every single week. The energy in practice has been phenomenal. They're really tired of beating up on each other. They're really looking forward tonight to playing another high major opponent in Oklahoma State.

So very busy day for the Auburn Tigers. Excited for those three young men to be here.

KeShawn Murphy is a kid that's been playing in the SEC for quite a while now. I'm proud of him and the growth that he's shown. He's a recent graduate of Mississippi State. I'm really proud of Murph.

Tahaad Pettiford had a breakout season last year on one of the -- on if not the best team in college basketball for most of the year. He's going to have a different role this year, a target on his back every single night, people gunning for him. To lead a team of 10 new players, he has an unbelievable opportunity in front of him to show how much he's grown as a leader and player.

Keyshawn Hall, the Big 12 leading scorer last year. He sees the headlines. Without saying anything, he's hungry, ready to go. I'm proud of Keyshawn Hall. He came here wanting to grow as a defender, as a leader, and as a winner.

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Really excited for what this group has to offer. I'm proud those guys are standing next to me today.

With that being said, we'll take any questions.

Q. Speaking of Keyshawn Hall, can you discuss how unique of a scorer he is compared to some of the other guys you had at the four.

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, I mean, you look at historically what we've had at that position, you look at Chuma Okeke, JT Thor, Jabari Smith, and even Johni Broome to an extent when he slid over to play some four last year, Keyshawn has a mold of all those guys as far as his ability to shoot the ball.

I would say the one area that Keyshawn is probably ahead of all those guys is his ability to put the ball on the floor, get to the rim, get contact, score through contact. He's really quick and versatile.

He's an interesting combination of all four of those guys in his ability to score the ball, right? I give him grief, I call him Conference Key because in conference play last year -- what'd you shoot? Like 40% from three? We need Conference Key to show up. He has been showing that as of late.

He'll get to the foul line. He does a good job of drawing contact and fouls, similar to what Johni would do. Shoots a really good percentage from the free-throw line.

He's very versatile. If you put a smaller guy on him, he's going to be able to post him up. If you put a bigger guy on him, he's just going to drive right around you. His ability to play both three and four is something we're going to work with this year. Obviously just excited for the different options that he gives us on the offensive end to be able to put him in situations to be successful.

Q. With there being so many new faces on this roster this year, how have you seen the chemistry grow?

STEVEN PEARL: Yes, since June 1st, obviously we had three freshmen and a ju-co coming in. From the Sweet 16 weekend all the way up till June 1st, we were recruiting this roster. We get done recruiting the roster around May 28 when Filip Jovic commits to us. They were together from June 1 till August.

I've been impressed to watch their bond and unity as a unit. They knew coming in there was going to be somebody at every position they had to compete with. That's what they signed up for, play against really good

competition and players not only to help the team win but to help them grow as an individual.

To watch them compete at a high level, knowing how much they hate to lose, but them grow with their friendships, has been really positive. I think it's a big reason why they all ultimately decided to stay. Proud of the kids and their chemistry together.

One of the unique things about what happened in September, we had to go through some adversity way sooner than 99% of college basketball teams had to this year. A lot of teams won't experience any adversity until November or December based on their schedule, say when they play Houston, get punched in the mouth in the first five possessions.

We had to go through adversity together in September. That's going to help this group play tight-knit and together, which is a blessing in disguise with B.P. stepping down.

To see them stay together through a difficult situation gives me a lot of hope and encouragement for the future.

Q. When you talk about Auburn big men over the last few years, what did you see out of Murph in terms of his skill set that would be a good fit for this team and a system that's a little different?

STEVEN PEARL: I don't know if you saw him in high school, but he was a shooter in high school. He was a guard. He had guard skill sets. You've been to some practices, seen some of the things he's been able to do when he puts the ball on the floor.

He showed in scrimmage Saturday, made three 3s in our scrimmage. He's shown the ability to stretch the floor and make the defense respect him out there. I'm really excited for him because while he was really effective at Mississippi State, considering what our fives do in our system -- we allowed Walker Kessler to shoot threes. He shot 20%. Big reason for that is he was the National Defensive Player of the Year.

Johni Broome shot a lot of threes. Shot I think 29% while he was at Auburn. He's one of the best players in college basketball. We allow our guys the confidence and the freedom to be able to step out and spread it. If they give the effort and energy on the defensive end, we'll allow those guys to have a lot more freedom on the offensive end.

When he got into the portal, he decided to come to Auburn because of what we let our fours and fives do from an offensive standpoint. He always had the skill set, and he's



really excited to show moving forward.

Q. Obviously the most influential coach that you've had is probably your father. I'm interested to know what other coaches you've come across in your life that made an impact on you with style and scheme, got you to this point?

STEVEN PEARL: When I was at Tennessee, Steve Forbes at Wake Forest was a coach that was one of our assistant coaches. He was really big for me. Jason Shay, he was a head coach at ETSU. They're both at Wake Forest now. Those two guys were my elite assistants when I was in college. They helped me a ton. They were the ones that got me excited about coaching. I watched how they game planned.

Those two, when it came to scouting reports, were as detailed as anyone I've ever been around. That got me really excited about the prospect of getting ready for opponents and game planning and personnel and offensive and defensive schemes.

Obviously once we got to Auburn, Todd Golden was a director of operations, but he was the one that brought analytics into our program. That was when KenPom was obviously really one of the only analytically driven databases out there. Now there are like 57 of them.

It's been a mold of some of my assistants from Tennessee, but then Todd had a really big impact on me as an assistant when he was at Auburn. It's pretty well-documented we've stayed in touch ever since he left Auburn to go to San Francisco. BP really helped him get that job at Florida. I think he might regret that now because Todd obviously turned into one hell of a head coach, kicked our ass last year a couple times.

Todd and Coach Forbes and Shay have been really influential in me wanting to become a coach, and obviously to continue on this journey.

Obviously B.P., one of the reasons why I believe I'm ready for this opportunity is because I've watched him. I don't think there's anyone better in the history of the game as far as rebuilding programs. You've seen the things that he does in Auburn. It's everything outside of basketball that he's elite at, in addition to being a great coach.

I think all those things are really important when it comes especially to a place at Auburn who really loves people that do that.

I think that's been a huge advantage to have a front-row seat to a master class in rebuilding a program. With 10

new guys, it's not a rebuild, but we have our work cut out for us. We have to do a lot of the same things that B.P. did to get Auburn to where it is today and to continue that success.

Q. What was your initial conversation like with your father when you knew he was going to step down, you were going to get this job? What was that emotion like to step into those shoes?

STEVEN PEARL: So B.P. and I have been having hypothetical conversations about his departure for years now. You text me asking me about it all the time. Is he going to be a senator, going to TV?

It's something we've been talking about for years, right? Really didn't get to a point where he felt like this was time until two weeks leading up to the decision that he made on the 21st.

He made John Cohen and a couple of our administrators aware he was going to let them know on the 21st, the day before practice, he was either going to stay or he was going to go. It allowed them to have the opportunity to plan for both scenarios: B.P. coming back as the head coach but also him stepping aside, what we're going to do with that.

In addition to that, BP and John three years ago, B.P. told him, Listen, I don't know how much longer I'm going to do this. John has been actively in his mind getting prepared for this for three years now, going through all the different options of do I bring in an outside coaching staff, do I bring in a big-name guy.

He watched this grow, the staff grow, as a unit and stay together and not go chasing other assistant jobs, head coaching jobs. He ultimately felt like the staff had earned the right and the opportunity to continue to move this thing forward.

As far as when it hit me, it didn't hit me until I showed up at the gym at Neville Arena when B.P. was filming his good-bye video. John pulled me aside and was like, Hey, you're the guy.

I'm like, All right, here we go (smiling).

It all happened really fast. But I'm ready because I've spent 38 years watching him do this at a very, very high level.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Pearl, thank you for your time.

STEVEN PEARL: Thank you, guys.

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