

GEICO Players Era Men's Championship

Wednesday, November 26, 2025

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

MGM Grand Garden Arena

Auburn Tigers

Coach Steven Pearl

Keyshawn Hall

Kevin Overton

Postgame Press Conference

Auburn - 85, St. John's - 74

STEVEN PEARL: Proud of our guys. Obviously, yesterday, you know, it was not easy to lose the way we lost. It was a little deflating. Obviously we wanted to step up. We came here to win three games. To lose that game the way we did was not -- it was not how we play.

They played really well. They had a lot to do with it. But still at the end of the day you never want to be in that position.

First thing we said in the locker room was how are we going to respond, how are we going to bounce back from that. Lesser teams, you kind of see it across the country in these tournaments, when they lose by a wide margin like that, there's another let-down the next day.

And I give our guys a lot of credit for not letting that happen.

We go into halftime down nine. We played good basketball I thought for the first probably 10 minutes. We had a six- or seven-point lead. They obviously cut back into it.

And some things were said at halftime that needed to be addressed. The two guys that are up here with me handled it like men. And that then obviously gave our team the courage and confidence to go out in the second half and outscore that team by 20 points. To scored 55 points and hold them to 35, they shot 34 percent in the second half, 38 percent from the game.

Our defense really stepped up and carried us. Really proud of the effort, proud of the execution. To be in



another difficult spot and to be able to fight and get a win against a ranked opponent, against a hall of fame coach, against a really good team, proud of our guys, proud of their step-up and proud of their bounce-back.

Q. Steve, what was the key for you guys defensively? You started off really well on defense, like you said had that tunnel. But second half pretty much all the way through was more like what you all wanted?

STEVEN PEARL: We executed the game plan. The first 10 minutes we did a really good job of communicating our switches with our guards, and that really disrupted what they did.

And Zuby is obviously an unbelievable player. He's a handful in there. I think he had 17 in the first half. To hold them to seven points in the second half was substantial and made a difference in the game.

I thought our guards did a good job being disruptive. We sent them to the foul line way too many times -- 28 free throw attempts. We were fortunate they missed a few down the stretch.

And our guys were just way more engaged. We forced them into 14 turnovers. We made plays when we needed to. But I thought we just did a better job of just executing our principles. We outrebounded them by three on the day. A big team that's a pretty good offensive rebounding team, to rebound them by three on the day is definitely a positive.

But I just thought for those guys, we played a lot of heavy minutes in the second half. I don't think that any of our guards came out the entirety of the second half. Their conditioning was solid after three games in three days.

You've got to give credit to Coach D and to Clark for putting them in position, and then them for fighting through fatigue and executing late. We just trusted in our principles like we did in the first 10 minutes for the second half, and obviously allowed us to get some real stops.

Q. You were disappointed in the offensive effort last night. You mentioned it when you gave your statement. 55 points in the second half tonight, including new career highs for Tahaad. What did you



see out of the group and how they responded after yesterday?

STEVEN PEARL: We talked about we needed 15-plus assists in the game. We had 16. 16 on 29 made field goals. On a really good -- against a good defensive team. That's Auburn basketball. That's what we got away from yesterday.

That's why we lost the way we lost because we had three assists on 22 made field goals. I thought we did a better job sharing it. We did a better job looking for each other and not taking the first shot.

So it was good that our guys saw -- they trusted each other. So, you know, I'm proud of just the bounce-back. Like, it was tough. I'm not going to lie. I'm the worst loser in the world. Man, I was in a rough spot.

But I have a lot of confidence in this team because I've seen them battle back through some tough situations already before. So I know they're capable.

So we just needed to reset and really focus on us. I thought we did a good job of that this morning in our preparation and talk about the things we need to do and a lot less about what they did.

I thought our guys hung onto that and ultimately came out and executed better. Obviously we talked about it after the game -- we still have a long way to go and a lot to improve on. But that was a step in the right direction.

Q. Could you talk about that stretch that Tahaad had offensively out there? He seemed to really take over the game. Just both on offense and really defensively he was out there giving a lot of pressure?

STEVEN PEARL: He had three steals. I thought his ball pressure was better. Had a couple of breakdowns defensively, but I thought overall his activity was really good.

They didn't have a true point guard, so he really needed to use his speed and quickness to his advantage. Same with K.O. I thought they did a good job of pressing up on those guys and making them make difficult decisions.

We've seen Tahaad do that before. And it was great because, like, all of our guys saw that he was getting it going, and they were looking to get him the ball more, which is what you've got to do. You've obviously got to feed the hot hand, and we've done it a lot of times when this guy gets going or this guy gets going.

Everybody kept asking, are you worried, are you worried? No because we've seen what he's capable of. His teammates trust him. He trusts the work that he puts into the game. And it's great to see him have some success.

And Key obviously steps up late and really just takes the ball to the basket. Misses three free throws, which is really disappointing. We have to talk about that when we get out of here. What were you shooting before that, like 98 percent or something like that? Crazy. We'll talk about that. (laughing)

It was just an unbelievable effort by our group. K.O. knocking down all his free throws tonight, 12 points. Five assists, one turnover. Point guard Overton over here. So it was just a group effort.

It was great to see Tahaad get it going. Obviously played more, what we're accustomed to. Happy for him. Obviously St. John's is a team that recruited Tahaad, so it was great to see him do that today.

Q. K.O. and Key, you guys combine for nine assists and two turnovers. You guys only had three as a team tonight. What was the key for you, especially in the second half, to get that ball movement going to get that execution that you all have wanted to get?

KEVIN OVERTON: I think it was just our trust, our togetherness throughout the second half. We were trying to make improvements from the first half. I think it was just our team. That's something we've steadily worked on is being more in flow with each other, learning to trust when a defense is pressing in to us and just making the right play. I think we made the right plays and that's the result.

KEYSHAWN HALL: Yeah, basically what he said. If we see 2 come on the ball or whatever, like, say if I catch it in the post and see 2 come onto the ball, I just try to get off as fast as I can because even if it's not an assist, it's going to be a pass to an assist. Like I passed to someone, he passed to someone else for a better shot. That's what we try and work on.

Q. Only 14 3-point attempts tonight. 44 points in the paint for Auburn. Sort of the desire, the dedicated effort to score around the basket tonight and how that played out.

STEVEN PEARL: I thought our guys did a great job attacking the rim. We talked about if we shot-faked and played off two feet and played physically going towards the basket, good things would happen.

Now, in the first half, we took 22 two-point field goals and

only got to the foul line four times. We let it disrupt us a little too much. I told them in the second half, just keep attacking the basket, keep attacking the rim. They're going to call those fouls. Just don't complain about it. Don't look for it. If you go and try to finish in contact they'll reward that.

I thought in the second half we did a good job of that. And we finished. We shot 64 percent in the second half. So I thought our guys did a great job of just recognizing -- we've done a good job all year playing physical offensively.

We average like 32, 33 free throw attempts a game. I'm glad we continue to trust what we do offensively and continue to pound the rock and get inside, play disciplined, play under control, limit our turnovers.

I thought Elyjah had two tough ones in the first half where I thought he had pretty nice moves in the paint, where he didn't get those four points. So two of those turnovers I thought were on really good, aggressive plays to the rim. So we've got guys that can get downhill and get past their men. That's something we haven't had in the past, and we have to continue to take advantage of that.

Q. Talk a little bit about KeShawn Murphy, how important he was to the team tonight. You guys had the disadvantage on the interior as far as size but he had some really big minutes for you all.

STEVEN PEARL: That 3 he made was huge. So obviously before the game, Filip Jovic banged up his wrist, his nonshooting wrist last night in the Michigan game. So he wasn't able to go. And we got in a lot of foul trouble at the 4 and the 5 pretty quickly.

And he was in foul trouble the entire time he was out there but still played 22 minutes. To get six rebounds, had three really big offensive rebounds. And he's very crafty around the rim.

We've got to do a good job -- we've got to give him the ball more in those spaces, kind of the way we do for Key, because Murph can score it down there. But he has to stay out of foul trouble for us to do those things.

And obviously, I think it was a six-point game, late in the shot clock, and the ball gets reversed and Murph bangs a 3. That was the dagger. Big shot from him. He hit a big shot in the Oregon game. He hit a big shot in the Bethune-Cookman game.

And we trust Murph and his ability to knock down shot down points. But he and Sebastian, considering we didn't have not much depth at the 5, him, Key and Murph did a

good job of guarding their bigs by committee because their bigs are obviously really good scorers, but they're also their best facilitators. Our bigs had their hands full. I thought they stepped up to the plate and showed they're one of the best front courts in the country.

Q. You guys were down 11 in the first half against a really good team. How did you stay together in that and have the confidence you all could come out and still pull off a win?

KEVIN OVERTON: Like he said, we had a talk at halftime. We addressed some things. And then we just lit a fire under us.

Like we said, the main thing was just winning. So we locked in on defense a little more. We tried to take away things that they couldn't get in and just try to lock down on rebounds.

We were trying to -- they're big as heck, so when we don't let them get second-chance points, that would be a big emphasis for us. We try to do that a little more and then things start clicking offensively.

Q. Question about the bench energy. Seemed like it was overwhelming. And one play in particular, Key, you had an offensive rebound that kept the possession going. The bench just explodes after you yank the ball out of the other guy's hands. Just the effect those plays can have moving forward?

KEYSHAWN HALL: Unconditional love. That's just our team. We love seeing each other do great. I think that's carried us in the moments where we do go down.

If we can get bench energy and everybody be happy for each other, those are things that carry us to wins, for sure. That's just our team.

Q. If I can go off topic for a second here. Proposal on the table for NCAA men and women in terms of the transfer portal. I know it's your first season, but you've been around coaching, obviously, a long time. It would shorten the window to 15 days, and it wouldn't open until after both Final Fours, men and women. Just your thoughts on that. Is it a benefit? Do you like that idea?

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, I think that's a double-edged sword because obviously you want to have the student-athlete in mind because you have a lot of young men and women that obviously don't make the NCAA Tournament, and they want to be able to find a new home as quickly as possible.

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But also I understand the other side, because we were in the Sweet 16 last year in Atlanta, and we were doing Zoom calls with this dude, like, every day. Ultimately, it's why we got him because he really appreciated the amount of time and love that we poured into him while we were about to play the biggest games of our lives.

This dude was also playing in the NCAA Tournament, Sweet 16/Elite Eight, so we didn't have to get to him until after the fact.

But I get both sides of it. But for the teams that obviously are advancing, it would obviously help to not have to be recruiting while we're in the NCAA Tournament. We're at the Final Four, and the day of the Florida game, we had two guys call us that day and tell us they were going to other schools.

As a coach, as you're trying to get your team ready for Florida, you're obviously trying to get ready for next year at the same time.

Regardless of what you do, people aren't going to be happy. But I think I'd be in favor of pushing the window back and shortening it a little bit so the teams that are in the tournament aren't at a disadvantage.

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