

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship - Final Four: Florida vs Auburn

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Alamodome

Florida Gators

Coach Todd Golden

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are joined now by head coach of the Florida Gators, Todd Golden. We'll take an opening statement from you, then take questions.

TODD GOLDEN: Obviously thrilled to be here. Really proud of our program, our staff, our players for the way we performed all season. Made it through a heck of an SEC best conference in basketball, for the past 20 years, won the SEC tournament, which we're really proud of. Have done what we needed to do to get to the Final Four.

Being our third year here, being this program, myself and my staff are really pleased with the progress we've made, excited to see what we're able to do this weekend.

THE MODERATOR: We'll take questions for Coach Golden.

Q. You were undefeated November, December, then lose to Kentucky. How do you think that prepared you to regroup and get to what we've seen today?

TODD GOLDEN: I honestly was as excited as you can be after that game, after a loss. A lot of people have questioned the strength of schedule we played in non-conference. Going on the road, playing in Rupp against a team that we knew was really good, we didn't guard necessarily well enough, but we played well in that game. It was a great game.

In a way it gave us confidence moving toward. Three or four days later we beat Tennessee at home, No. 1 in the country, by 30. I think that week with those two contests explained to us and built a lot of belief within our program that we belonged at the top of the SEC.

Q. We were talking in the locker room with a couple of your guys. Micah said, I knew last summer that we

had this type of group in terms of the close-knit group. He said it says a lot about our staff because 80% of us are different transfers that have come into the program. How do you navigate the climate to try to get the guys that you know are going to fit to the degree that this group has fit? What can you say about the way this group has fit?

TODD GOLDEN: This team, the process of kind of building this roster started three years ago when we got down to Gainesville. I point to Will Richard as kind of being the starting point for us. He was the first young man that committed to our program when we got the job.

I can't say enough about what Will has done for us as a program since he's been here. After the first year, we were very active in the transfer portal. We were fortunate enough to get Walter Clayton, Zyon Pullin, Tyrese Samuel, Micah Handlogten, specifically, and kind of had some unknown freshmen at the time that we got that I don't think a lot of people outside of our building appreciated. I point to Tommy and Condo specifically with those guys, and Denzel kind of growing up.

Obviously last year we had a good year, making it to the SEC tournament championship game, but fall short in the NCAA tournament. We felt like we needed additional layers of toughness, physicality, experience to kind of bridge that gap for this nucleus we had returning. Did a great job keeping our nucleus. And then the addition of Alijah, Rueben, Sam, that group, just really finished this team. We have great guys that are unselfish, enjoy playing together. Our staff has done a good job of defining roles so everybody understands their job to help us win.

It goes back to the players. They have been incredibly unselfish, allowed us to coach them. They're very consistent, compete every day. Three years in the works. I'm really happy with the success we've had.

Q. How much has getting on this stage proof of concept for your analytics approach? How have you balanced that with going your gut at times?

TODD GOLDEN: We're very analytical in everything we



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do. We talk about that a lot. Whether it's roster building, whether it's scheduling, deciding who I want to play, game scouting reports, et cetera.

It's more than any one specific thing, the way I like to explain it, a macro outlook on our decision-making and how we build out. We try to gather as much data as we possibly can when it comes to any sort of decision, then make what decision that data tells us to make. Then we got to live with the consequences. It's not always going to work. Life is not perfect. You want to give yourself the best chance to be successful and live with the results.

I think it shows great proof of concept. We try to bridge that gap also of being analytical while also using a little bit of a human element to make some certain decisions.

Big picture-wise I think obviously where we are right now and the way we've done it is really good proof of concept with the way we're trying to build our program.

Q. What did that Auburn game tell you about Walter? Obviously had many amazing performances to date coming off an injury. Very efficient. What did you find out about him that night?

TODD GOLDEN: I wouldn't say necessarily found out anything new. I kind of cemented what we've known about him for a long time. He's an amazing player. He was banged up in the Tennessee game that we lost. We had to make a tough decision coming home that next week in terms of the Vanderbilt game. The great thing about Walt is he wanted to play. He was going to play on a little bit of a bum ankle for his teammates.

We thought it would make sense to hold him out and get him ready for the back half of the season instead of letting him be gimpy down the stretch. That's the benefit of having a great deep team. Guys like Denzel Aberdeen steps up in that Vandy game, plays 35 minutes, no turnovers. Urby steps up, hits two big threes.

We get through that game with a win, allows us to get to the Auburn game with a healthy and fresh Walt. Again, he did what he does. Steps up in the biggest moments, played 40 minutes, was elite scoring the basketball in the first half of the game, was elite making plays for others in the second half of the game. Just controlled it from start to finish.

I think things that we internally already knew about him was kind of realized by everybody outside watching that he was, if not the best, one of the best guards in America. He certainly displayed that over the back half of the season as well.

Q. You mentioned Tommy and Alex Condon as two guys that were important evaluations that helped set you up to be here. Take me through the process of getting those guys to Gainesville, how important they have been in getting you to this point.

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, well, I remember that first summer on the road, I was with a couple of my coaches. A media guy that I really like and respect, we were telling him we wanted Tommy. He wasn't sure that he was -- that was you, right? I love messing with you about that.

Tommy and Condo, obviously we projected a little bit with their ability, their talent. They're way more athletic than people give them credit for coming out of high school. Both undervalued, under-recruited places. Tommy was in Pennsylvania, prep school. Condo was playing his fourth year of basketball in Australia.

Sounds cliché, something that I took from Kyle Smith at Columbia, great work ethics, attitudes, guys that really want to be here. Those guys checked all three of those boxes.

They're obviously producing at an insane level right now, playing incredibly well. A lot has to do with who they are as people. High-achieving people that come from great families. They were grateful to be at Florida. We didn't have to beg them to come, make any promises to them to come. It was a mutually beneficial relationship.

I think you're seeing guys like that, not just in our program but other places, go into it with that mentality having a lot more success. They are incredibly, incredibly, incredibly important to us and how we play and what we do.

They deserve a lot of credit for the success we've had.

Q. It obviously means a lot to the Phoenix area to see one of their own succeed at such a high level. For you, could you go back to your days playing at Sunnyslope High and tell yourself you'd be coaching a Final Four team, what do you think you would say?

TODD GOLDEN: I would not believe it at that point. When I was back at Sunnyslope, I was just praying I could find a way to become a Division I basketball player. That was kind of my goal there.

But one of the things that I've been incredibly fortunate with all throughout my career is being able to play for and be around really great coaches. Started at Sunnyslope with Dan Mannix, a Brooklyn guy, Arizona State Hall of Fame, high school basketball. Steve Rosenbaum, the head

assistant, was a guy that instilled a lot of belief in me in terms of trying to become a Division I player.

We understood and got used to winning there. I think we went 77-12 in our three years, of my three years playing varsity, having a level of toughness physically and mentally before getting to Randy Bennett and Saint Mary's.

Sunnyslope, I'll love it forever. Five minutes from my house growing up. Incredible public school where I met so many people, have friends from life from there. I'm incredibly proud that I could do it as a Viking, being able to be at a place like this.

Q. Off your history, Bruce Pearl gave you one of your first opportunities with college coaching. What is your relationship with him today, how grateful you are to get that start?

TODD GOLDEN: We're incredibly close. Have been for a long time now. Almost 15 years.

It's a little surreal, to be honest, to be able to be here at the Final Four. That in itself is a little surreal. But playing on Saturday against one of your biggest and best mentors, not exactly something you expect when the season starts.

I know he's incredibly proud of me. I'm incredibly grateful for him and his family and the opportunities they provided for me. I would not be here if I didn't have my relationship and experience working with and being around Bruce and his son Steven. A little bit of a full-circle moment for both of us.

When the ball goes up on Saturday, it's going to be pretty cutthroat. Until then, there will be a lot of love shown. Again, a surreal moment for sure.

Q. This stage is so different than anything these guys have experienced so far, probably you as well. Why are they ready for the Final Four?

TODD GOLDEN: I think the same reason why I've had success all year is why we'll be okay, being here, this being the first time.

We have a very mature group. Very unselfish group, guys that are very driven. You look at the way we played all year. We've been a very consistent team. We've always been able to bounce back from losses the right way, make sure we get back to who we are and playing well. I think we've won 10 in a row coming into this event.

Our guys are not going to be satisfied going home Saturday night. I think going into the mentality that

obviously it will be a great season regardless, but if we lose on Saturday, we'll have a bad taste in our mouths.

Our senior leaders on the perimeter drive that, Walter, Will, Alijah, make sure our competitive spirit is in the right place, our young guys in the front court play so stinking hard, they'll do whatever they need to do to keep us alive.

I point to the collective unity of this group as the main reason as to why we deserve to, and we'll do what we need on Saturday night to stay here.

Q. Talk about in the locker room just now, guys seemed so relaxed. They're playing Madden, chanting DJ Lagway's name. What do you attribute that to? Is it the schedule you played knowing that you belong here? Talk about that a little bit more.

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, I think, again, the two things I point to is our team's maturity and our belief. We've had a great season. We won 34 games. You don't do that by accident. I think our guys understand and know that when we're at our best, we are one of if not the best team in college basketball.

Our guys have put in the work. We didn't make it here by accident. We earned the opportunity to be here and to compete. Our guys enjoy doing that on a nightly basis.

I think they understand what's at stake, but at the same time they want to enjoy being here and enjoy the fruits of the labor that we've had all year.

Q. A lot coming into this week was made out of Alijah playing in his second Final Four. How have you seen him step up as a leader? How important is that to what you're trying to accomplish this week?

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, he's done it for us all year to be honest. From the moment he got to campus in the summer, we knew that his experience and his mentality and the way he approached workouts and practice would really help this group.

I think he's raised the bar for Walt and Will also, coming in, having that Final Four experience. Obviously Walt and Will have great experience, but they hadn't made it here yet. Alijah had a lot of respect from our locker room because of that. Adding him, Rueben and Sam in that class, that's really completed that group, and his leadership is a big part of that.

Q. Walter was at Iona and you saw him on tape. Last year he was significantly better. How did he evolve into a true point guard himself this year and become



an All-American on top of that?

TODD GOLDEN: He's always had the ability. He's always had a tight handle. He's always been able to make plays out of the ball screen, obviously been able to score at an elite level.

I think it was us kind of providing that opportunity for him to take on the ownership of being the lead guard, obviously surrounding him with guys that fit and that made sense, that would kind of lift up all the good parts of his game.

Again, he's been elite all year. He's done a great job of taking care of the ball for us, reading the game, taking what the defense gives him. Some games he goes for 15 in the first half, seven assists in the second half. He does a great job never getting too high or too low, controlling the basketball game.

It's the jump we expected him to make by having that opportunity. Being around Walter every day, you understand how he's wired, what kind of makes him the competitor he is. We had a lot of belief in him coming into this year and obviously he's rewarded us for that belief.

Q. How did you react when you heard the SEC called the best conference ever? Since you're assured a spot to play for the championship, the league, does the SEC have to win the whole thing to back up everything that's been said about it this season?

TODD GOLDEN: I think the proof is in the pudding, so to speak. Analytically, you look at KenPom, Torvik, it is clear that the SEC was had the best efficiency margin over any league the past 20 years, I believe. The success that the league has had in the tournament has been pretty amazing. To your point, whether it's us or Auburn, one of us is going to be playing for a national championship on Monday night. I think that speaks enough for itself.

The league obviously a lot of respect, a lot of notoriety after the non-conference. Once you get to elite play, people wonder how real it is. I believe the results we have had so far in the NCAA tournament speak to that.

Q. Take us back to Walter's recruitment. You're going up against pretty well-known coaches in Pitino, his former school. He said it was very close. What do you remember about the recruitment? What do you think put you over the top?

TODD GOLDEN: It was incredible to think about. We brought him down for a visit. Obviously he grew up about an hour and a half, two hours south of our campus. A lot of his family came up for the visit.

I thought we had a great visit. Thought it went really, really well. Thought we were in a good shape.

Really hard to beat Rick Pitino, man. He went back up to New York and did a visit right after Coach Pitino got the St. John's job, with one of his friends Daniss Jenkins, who is a back court teammate of his at Iona.

I remember Easter Sunday, he was finishing up his visit getting a call from his mom. She was a little concerned that it maybe had started swinging the other direction for him, following Pitino.

I guess one of the benefits of being Jewish is that we don't celebrate Easter. Got a plane that afternoon, flew up, met with Walt on Easter Sunday evening. Me and Coach Korey McCray. Had a great meal talking through everything with him. Before we left that night, he let us know he was going to come home.

I think that extra effort, going up there and sitting with him, reconfirming our vision for him, what our program would be like was really important. Obviously I'm really glad we got on that plane. It was really well worth it.

Q. You've said that Steven Pearl is one of your closest friends. How are you feeling about coaching against him on the biggest stage at the Final Four?

TODD GOLDEN: It's incredible. It's what life is all about. We were laughing. We FaceTimed on Sunday after they beat Michigan State. We were shaking our heads like, Man, we're legitimately going to the Final Four, competing against each other.

A long way from when we first got down to Auburn, I was director of basketball operations, he was the assistant strength coach. You can remind him of that when you see him (smiling).

Like I said before, Bruce and Steven are incredibly important to me, have been really impactful with the opportunities I've had. I'm just really grateful for my relationship with them. I think it speaks volumes about the way we build our programs, that we're both still alive right now.

Q. You mentioned a little bit ago about your relationship with Bruce and him kind of being a mentor to you. When you see a matchup like this is possible, do you embrace or are excited for the opportunity to go against somebody like that or does it feel weird playing against somebody who has been so close to you?

TODD GOLDEN: I don't like it as much in the regular season. At this point in the year, when you're in the Final Four, it is what it is. You're going to go out there and do everything you can to take each other out.

I think in a way we're both pleasantly surprised to be competing against each other at this point in the season.

THE MODERATOR: Want to thank Coach Golden for joining us.

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