

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

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Alamodome

Auburn Tigers

Coach Bruce Pearl

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



Corey approaches it a little differently. He really builds relationships. He does it through faith. Time is a love language. Corey spends time with Chad and has gotten to know him really well and is able to help him navigate through different challenges.

When you are able to build trust in a relationship between a coach and a player, you can get through difficult things, and there's nobody that you'd rather celebrate success with than with somebody who sort of helped you get through some of that stuff.

Q. Four years ago, what was your knowledge or your staff's knowledge, if any, of Johni Broome and Walter Clayton Jr. as high school prospects? What would you attribute their unique paths to getting to First Team All-America status, now being here in the Final Four in a unique way?

BRUCE PEARL: Obviously great players. Arguably the best players in the country at their position. It's hard to recognize a more complete point guard than Walter Clayton Jr. Look, he's been the best guard on the floor almost every single night. He was when we played them in Neville Arena.

Denver Jones and Miles Kelly and Tahaad Pettiford, Chad Baker-Mazara have an opportunity again to change that, but that's going to take some real doing.

I remember when they were both coming out, because both Florida and Auburn tried to recruit both of them. I remembered Walter really wanting to either -- as I recall, he was going to stay in New York and maybe go to St. John's or go back home. I remember that being a factor for him. So we had very little chance.

With Johni, we had two advantages. One, we had played Morehead State earlier that year. Johni got a chance to play against Jabari Smith and Walker Kessler and watch what kind of phenomenal year they had. And by playing in Neville Arena, he saw The Jungle, the incredible home-court advantage that we had. Of course, when both of those guys went and drafted in the first round, Johni knew the opportunity was wide open at Auburn.

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Coach Pearl of Auburn. We'll ask coach to open things up with a statement, then we'll take couple questions.

Coach.

BRUCE PEARL: Thank you. We're excited about being back at the Final Four. You don't know that you're ever going to get there once in your career, so you feel incredibly blessed and grateful to have a second opportunity.

Proud of our team for playing probably the most ambitious non-conference schedule we've ever played, and then have to go through the grind of playing in what was the best conference in college men's basketball in history of the NCAA.

To be able to come out of that as a regular-season champion was quite an accomplishment. The question then was, Is there any more step up in your game? 'Cause that's what you have to do in March.

I thought that through the Creighton, Michigan, Michigan State games, we demonstrated that we had more in the tank.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open things up for questions.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Chad Baker-Mazara and Corey Williams. I know they're close. How would you describe their relationship and just how valuable has it been for not only them but for the program?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, there's a lot of aspects to coaching. Part of it is ministerial. Coach Dye said you can coach 'em as hard as you love 'em. Coach Dye coached 'em hard.

Florida was bringing back one of their good big kids, Castleton. Our cupboard was bare. He knew he could come in. We have taken full advantage of the big fella over the last three years. Arguably the best transfer because of the three-year impact he's had, maybe in the history of the portal.

Q. Tahaad seems to have embraced coming off the bench as a six man. Not everybody would embrace that. Can you talk about were there any struggles in getting him to embrace that role, maybe the Jersey City toughness that he brings?

BRUCE PEARL: I suppose some would just sort of expect that to be a problem. Great player, one of our best players, and yet only started one game because of I think Denver was injured. Not a word. Not a body language, shoulder shrug, roll eye ever from Tahaad. Because if he did, his dad would slap it right out of him, Travis.

In the sense that Tahaad has great respect for the guys like Denver, Chad or Chaney that were in front of him. They were seniors.

Now, he may not feel the same way if he's not in there at the end. In case you hadn't noticed, he was almost always in there at the end.

I think it's about being raised right. It's about being raised to sort of have a level of respect and manners for the position of a coach having to make those decisions, then a player that is not worrying about what he can't control.

He's been unbelievable, one of the best freshmen in college basketball this year. You look at him, Cooper Flagg, maybe a couple others, who has had greater impact on the success of the team than those two guys?

He also recognizes that he's always been overlooked because he's 5'11". He'll be overlooked in the Final Four again. But he has the opportunity to prove that he's pretty special.

The Jersey City toughness, it comes through all the time, that confidence. He feels prepared. Dad played him up his whole life. He always played against older kids. This is nothing new to him.

Q. I know you kind of gave Todd Golden his start in college coaching. He has a special relationship with your son and you. What is that relationship with him, now having to go against him in the Final Four?

BRUCE PEARL: Here is the thing. I didn't give him his

start. He actually got his start at Columbia with Coach Smith, who is a huge, huge part of his coaching tree and family and everything like that.

But I did give him his first shot at the Power Five.

What is significant about it is I'd been out of coaching for three years. When I was getting back into coaching, I was putting my staff together. I brought my son Steven, I brought Todd, a couple other guys I really trusted. I think that meant a lot to Todd. Todd recognized how close I was to my coaches, how much I relied on my coaches, how much I expected of my coaches, and the bar that we set about the way they behaved, the way they taught, the way they carried themselves.

Even though I only had Todd for two years, he helped lay the foundation, helped getting some of the recruiting started that helped us in our fourth year. Todd and Megan had just gotten married. They were newlyweds. They had their first son while he was at Auburn. I was one of the first to hold his son. There's a close connection.

All the while he becomes best friends with his fellow assistant, Steven Pearl. The relationship has lasted.

Q. It seems like people have been trying to find ways to write off Auburn ever since the plane incident. You never let that happen. When there's that target on your back as a No. 1 throughout the year, how do you go about pushing away all that outside noise? Is it any different here in the Final Four?

BRUCE PEARL: No. What I've tried to do all year long is demonstrate that this is uncharted waters for Auburn men's basketball. We had some great moments in our history, great coaches, Sonny Smith and Cliff Ellis, great players in Charles Barkley and Chuck Person and several others. No real sustained great, great success.

Here we are at the Final Four. Like Houston has won national championships. They have history with Guy Lewis. They've been here before. Duke, that story has been over and over again, right? Billy Donovan took Florida here, won a couple national championships. Florida has more history.

We come in as the overall No. 1, but we're probably considered the fourth best team here right now. There is nothing new. I prefer the underdog role rather than having to prove that we're as good as we say we are.

So we're going to take that underdog role into the Final Four and see if we can capitalize on it.

Q. Obviously this is two Final Fours in short order for you, short span. There's been a lot of discussion about revenue sharing, especially in the time when football is commanding the spotlight with media deals, money. How do you view the way basketball fits at Auburn in the new landscape in terms of resources? Here you are, built an elite program.

BRUCE PEARL: I think every day the rules change. I think that could be the case every day leading up to the next several days. So I couldn't answer the question because I don't know exactly what revenue sharing is going to look like. We don't know if the case is going to be settled. I'm just glad that the student-athletes are finally able to be compensated, and the market has demonstrated they've been worth a lot more than what they've been compensated in the past.

We do need some guidelines, absolutely. If we want to have a true national champion, when the ball gets tossed up, we all need to be playing with the same resources, same rules, generally speaking. That's what they do in every other professional sport.

I don't know what that is going to look like. I'm sure in the SEC we're going to be committed to being excellent in everything across the board, men, women, all sports. I don't see the SEC or Greg Sankey creating a revenue share where we can't maintain the level of competitiveness that we enjoy right now.

Q. The division in this tournament, two old guys, two young guys. You and Kelvin have been through adversity, all these things in your career. How much difference does that make, and is this kind of a trend of younger head coaches?

BRUCE PEARL: You know, the only way I look at it is, Kelvin and I have fewer chances to get to where we are right now, whereas Jon Scheyer and Todd Golden will be back here many more times.

Kelvin and I better take advantage of it this time 'cause we're clearly on the back nine. I'm not on the 18th hole yet, but we're getting closer.

No, Todd and Jon don't give up anything in experience. They just give up a little bit, and they don't have as much gray hair. They may not have been beat down as much as Kelvin and I have been over the years.

Q. What do you remember about that Florida game? Afterwards you talked about a hunger level on their part, obviously defensively not one of your best games. Do you still look at it the same way after

looking at more film of it?

BRUCE PEARL: I thought Florida outplayed us. I mean, I thought it was a Florida win rather than Auburn loss. I did feel at the time that we had some fatigue that was sort of setting in a little bit. We really hadn't had much of a grind point. We had won there at the Florida game, and we may have won after we won the SEC Championship at Rupp.

Florida won the game and controlled. We got off to a really good start, but they won the game the way they've been winning game, banged 13 threes, had 22 assists, their front line played with tremendous physicality and outplayed us. If that's the case, they're going to beat us again. They scored 90. So their depth I think was a factor.

So, yeah, we recognize that there are a number of things that we didn't do that they did that we're going to have to fix this time around if we're going to have a chance to beat them.

Again, Clayton can't be the best player on the floor again for us to win the game.

Q. Johni Broome said he's been working hard, he'll be 100% on Saturday. What does that mean for this team that he's going to be completely available, no limitations?

BRUCE PEARL: I'm glad he feels that way. Today was the first day he moved in practice. I was glad to see him. Obviously good to see him out there. And the one thing Johni Broome showed in this NCAA tournament, that there was another level, there was another gear.

Everybody keeps watching him and wondering when is he going to fizzle, when is he going to not show up. Again, he just managed to step up.

He was 10-13 against Michigan State. Florida recognizes that. Florida's bigs are a little bigger and more athletic than Michigan State's or Michigan's bigs. But Johni was MVP of the south region. We rode him hard. We're going to ride him hard again on Saturday.

Q. That first matchup against Florida, where did you see your team grow the most since that game, and did that serve as a turning point for the season?

BRUCE PEARL: I think when you go through the grind of the SEC, that it's really hard to have it every night. I think Florida had it that night. I do. Played great.

Now, look, we maybe didn't. I've been saying since prior to the Florida game, I think Florida's playing the best

basketball of anybody in the country. I've said it publicly a dozen times.

Is that a slap in the face to Duke or to Houston or to my Auburn team? No, it's not. But that's how I have felt. Does that mean we can't beat them? Of course not.

I felt that way going into the game. And then in the game they showed us that. They were better than us. We were the No. 1 team in the country.

I don't know that we've improved that much. Maybe we know a little bit more of who we are and what we have to do in order to win that game, the things we didn't do the first time.

Q. You mentioned Florida's bigs. The physicality and rebounding, that was a challenge you presented to your team going into the tournament. How well do you think they've responded to that throughout four games? How much better are they going to have to be compared to that first matchup against Florida?

BRUCE PEARL: Almost asked and answered. I think in a sense we stepped up with our physicality, we competed very well on the boards, been really good on the offensive glass. We've been able to win those matchups in four games.

This is what Florida's strength is. They're plus 12.5 rebound margin right now. They have five bigs that they rotate. Right now we're rotating three.

Depth is usually a strength of mine. We typically, in my career, played nine, 10 guys double-digit minutes. We're really only playing seven, maybe eight.

The length of the timeouts, the extra five minutes at halftime, gives a team with a little less depth an opportunity to maybe get a little bit more rest. But obviously what takes its toll are the number of bodies they're going to put on our leading scorer in Johni Broome.

They know it. We know it. He knows it. We're ready for it.

Q. Considering that you guys are a team that's built on experience, you consider your starters being seniors here, the COVID years, how do you see this being a benefit to you and your team?

BRUCE PEARL: This is it. We're running out of one shining moments. We do it now, or like Dylan Cardwell said, this is last free breakfast. Every morning he's been prepared to wake up and not have a free breakfast. There's a lot of T-shirts. We want Dylan to continue to eat

free.

There's a level of desperation knowing tomorrow could be our last game every single time for this group. They don't want this to end.

THE MODERATOR: We thank Coach Pearl for joining us. Welcome back once again to the Final Four.

BRUCE PEARL: Thank you. Great to be here.

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