

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

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Alamodome

Florida Gators

Coach Todd Golden

Will Richard

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



Obviously he's had a great career and been really impactful in terms of their success. Knock on wood for us. We've been able to do pretty well also.

We'd have been happy to have him. I'm happy for him at Auburn and the success that he's had.

Q. This year in the Sweet 16, there was only one double-digit seed. That school was from the SEC. I pose this question to you because you played at Saint Mary's and you coached at San Francisco. Do you see a growing disparity between the power schools and the Big East Conference and the non, and is that a detriment for the tournament?

TODD GOLDEN: I definitely see a growing disparity between the levels. I don't think that's hard to see when you look at the numbers and see how the different teams have done over the course of the year. Really I think it's kind of been trending this way for the last couple years. This may be the best example of that the way the tournament has shaken out.

Bad for the tournament? I don't know. I think there's still been some great moments and some really, really good games.

For me, I think the goal or something that should be celebrated as well is that I truly believe the four best teams in college basketball are here this weekend. I think that's something that you go back however many years hasn't been the case.

Even though there maybe weren't as many exciting upsets or storylines that way, I think the fact that all four of the best teams in college basketball all year long making it this far is a great storyline, as well.

Q. There's been a lot of conversation about the analytical approach that your team has taken. Could you give a little bit more detail about how the analytics and advanced metrics that you're using set you apart and what you're doing that you feel is unique.

TODD GOLDEN: The way I try to describe it is from a

THE MODERATOR: We're joined now by the head coach of the Florida Gators Todd Golden.

We'll ask you to make an opening statement, then take some questions.

TODD GOLDEN: Happy to be back here again. Practice here in a little bit. Had a good day yesterday. Doing everything we can to limit the distractions and allow our guys to focus on trying to win tomorrow night. Just excited for this game tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach Golden.

Q. I wanted to ask about y'all's recruitment of Johni. What did y'all see in him? What can you recall from that recruitment?

TODD GOLDEN: When we were fortunate enough to get this opportunity, one of the first things we did was take a look at guys from the state of Florida that were producing and doing well across the college landscape. Obviously he popped pretty quick for what he was able to do at Morehead.

He went in the portal. We were excited at the opportunity to get him to be a Gator. Obviously because of his success there, was recruited by pretty much every big-time program around. We were fortunate enough to get in the mix, to get in the final two. I think we did a good job in a short period of time of kind of explaining our vision and kind of introducing him to our staff and kind of what we had going on.

Bruce had been at Auburn, had been solidified as well. They do a great job as well. He decided to go be a Tiger.



macro perspective, we try to view everything we do through an analytical lens. We gather as much data as we possibly can on whatever decision we're trying to make, then letting that data kind of point us in the right direction.

I would say there's specific instances in different parts of our program that I could point to, whether it's recruiting, whether it's in-game management, whether it's scheduling, that would probably take me a lot longer to explain.

Big picture-wise, again, trying to view everything through an analytical lens. There's obviously times we use the human element as well to decision-make.

We know we're not perfect and we know we're human. We want to give ourselves as much data and information as we can before we make decisions.

The instance against Texas Tech, the fouling at the end of the game, that's something unique that a lot of teams wouldn't do or wouldn't think to do. That's just one example. It's really more of a macro perspective.

Q. Mid-major, Power Five, I want to get your opinion, I've heard a lot of people contributing no Cinderellas in the Elite Eight due to the transfer portal and NIL. Which would you pick that's more attributive to that?

TODD GOLDEN: 100% transfer portal, the transfer rules. If you just took NIL out of the equation, I really believe we would still be having these conversations. These young men and women have the ability to really just take a look at their situation after every season as opposed to in the past where it was a one-time transfer exception, then you had to make that one decision and live with it.

When these men and women are able to move every off-season, coaches have more opportunities to get it right, so to speak, in terms of who they recruit, who they add to their program.

The young men and women I would say for a majority of them, they want to play at the highest level, prove they're the best, they compete at the highest level.

The transfer legislation, people being able to move after every year is definitely the driving force in that.

Q. Multiple players have told me that Alijah is far and away the best trash talker on the team. Do you agree with that? What is the craziest thing you've ever heard him say during a game or practice that we can print?

TODD GOLDEN: We're going to have to talk about that (smiling).

I'd say he's an incredible competitor. Just the way, I've talked about it a lot, his addition to our program this past off-season has lifted us another level. Not just for the program, but for individual players like in the way they compete. He does a great job of kind of creating that expectation within our program on a day-to-day basis.

I don't know if there's anything specific that I'm going to point to. Again, the mentality, just the approach, understanding every time he steps on the floor he's going to compete at a really, really high level. The guys call him "Crash Out" for a reason. He really gets after it, has a great sense of competition and mentality.

I think it has definitely kind of bled to the rest of the crew.

Q. I know a lot of your guys on the roster this year are transfers. You got a lot of the key guys from last year's team to return this year, Clayton, Richard, Condon, Haugh. Can you speak to the importance of the roster continuity, why that's been successful this year?

TODD GOLDEN: I think continuity is incredibly important. We were finally in a position after our second year where we had a lot of really talented players in our program that we felt like we could build around them.

That was not the case after year one. Year one it was more about just trying to get an influx of talent into the program so we could compete in the best conference in America, which we were able to do. Because we were able to bring in talented young guys, specifically Alex, Tommy and Denzel as guys that have grown within our program, then Walt and Will in the portal the year before, we felt like those five were great to build around.

The way that we hope to do it, obviously last year we were able to, hopefully moving forward, is retaining the key players in our program. We have even more than last year that we're going to do everything we can to retain, then kind of fill in the gaps around that.

But I know you understand it, you've seen it between us, Auburn and Houston, each program has about 70% of their roster, at least playing roster from last year. Duke is around 30. Duke has three incredibly talented freshmen that are hard to get.

The continuity piece is definitely important. I've said this before, Florida is such a great place I feel we can execute a real program. My hope is that we'll be able to do it next year with the same guys as well.

Q. You kind of touched on the transfer portal benefit. When you look at Johni and Walter growing up 30 minutes from each other, what does that say about the inexact science of recruiting and guys like that getting the proverbial chip on their shoulder to prove themselves?

TODD GOLDEN: Again, with the transfer legislation the way it is, those guys, I would say even for Walter and Johni, as 18-year-olds, would not be able to help an SEC program compete the same way anywhere close to what they do now.

Walter had a very good freshman year at Iona and became MAAC Player of the Year as a sophomore. Jumped up and became a very good SEC player. It might have taken him a little longer if he came to us right away. Same for Johni. He had really good years at Morehead.

You look at a lot of the teams that have had success, they're older. They have senior-laden rosters, guys that are 23, 24, even 25. Now the way that college has shaken out.

It is an inexact science, for sure. It's really, really hard. A lot of times it takes getting a little older for those guys to really be able to impact at a high, high level.

Q. When you were being recruited to Florida by Scott Stricklin, was this a job that you targeted? What was attractive to it for you? Can you talk about Scott, sort of how he supported you.

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, well, when we had a pretty good run that last year at San Francisco, we started getting some calls and some different opportunities. As soon as my agent let me know that Florida had reached out, right from that moment that was the job that I wanted.

Fortunately Scott and I connected and had a really great, easy conversation that felt natural. I didn't feel like either of us were having to get out of our comfort zone to have good conversations. I was fortunate enough to Zoom with them the next morning, where I was able to talk to Scott, and then Duke Werner, Lynda Tealer, and Chip Howard, the senior administrative team.

Again, we spoke for about an hour and a half, felt like it took five minutes. We're on the same page in regards to what we thought the vision that Florida should be and kind of the attitude in which we should have in terms of attacking the opportunity. Just kind of being grateful for it and understanding that Florida is a great place, kind of recruiting to the strengths of the school in terms of an academic school, the tradition and history that had come

before us.

I was in college when Taurean and his teams went back-to-back national championships. I always had a very positive feeling and outlook in regards to Florida.

After that conversation, transparently we had some other opportunities we were close to. I started kind of putting pressure on Scott, calling Scott, saying, I would love to be your coach. I don't want to miss out on some other opportunities that I have. If you feel the same way, let's do this thing.

24 hours later, I was fortunate enough to get the opportunity. I'm super grateful for Scott, for Duke Werner, Lynda Tealer and her time at Florida, now Amy Hass. They've been incredible. I appreciate their support. I feel like they know who I am, know the type of program I am, the type of program I run.

I feel like we are all very grateful for each other and the fact that we're here at the Final Four right now.

Q. You were an early exit in last year's tournament. A year later you're in the Final Four. What does that mean to you to reach this level of competing for a national championship after the way last year ended?

TODD GOLDEN: Just proof of concept and growth for our program. We had a disappointing end to last season, but it was a really good year. We made it to the SEC tournament championship game, lost to a great Auburn team. Get back to the NCAA tournament. Lose arguably the most exciting game in the first round of the NCAA tournament, without Micah, after we lost him to a really tough injury.

We had a sour taste in our mouth at the end of the year, but we weren't disappointed about where our program was, answering the question about making sure we kept those guys that we knew embodied what we wanted our program to be about, then making sure we added the right pieces, which we certainly did.

Did we necessarily expect Final Four this year? I think that's probably like a hard expectation on a year-to-year basis. We definitely believed in what we were doing and who we had in our program, both from a player and staff perspective, that this group had a chance to do something special. We have another opportunity tomorrow to see if we can get one step further.

I think it's a great example of what we believe in working, just seeing how far we can take it this year.

THE MODERATOR: We want to welcome Will Richard, as well. Grab a seat.

TODD GOLDEN: Hey, Will.

THE MODERATOR: Will has to bring his own nameplate to the Final Four. He's ready to do it, though (smiling).

Q. Alijah having played in the Final Four already, has that been something you've leaned on? What might that experience do for both him individually and also for your team?

TODD GOLDEN: It was something that we've leaned into since he got to campus. That was a really big part of why we targeted Alijah and why we wanted him to come into our program.

With Walter and Will returning last year, we knew we needed one more really good perimeter player, but we had to make sure it was someone that fit well with them both from an on-court standpoint, but also personality standpoint. These guys are around each other all the time.

The thing that I always really enjoyed about Alijah was his experience, the fact that he played in a Final Four, had really good success, felt like he always had a chip on his shoulder and wanted to lead and be a part of something that was bigger than himself.

Early on in the summer, he talked a lot about playing in the Final Four, just that experience. But with Will and Walt, I felt internally we had some great leadership as well. The combination that those guys, the leadership that those three are able to exude amongst themselves has carried us all year.

Now that we're here, I would say it's amazing, it's not that important, we're all taking this in our own way, attacking it our own way, but I do think his experience helped us to this point.

THE MODERATOR: First appearance of the week for Will Richard. We'll take questions for Will or Coach Golden from students from our Full Court Press program.

Q. Coach Golden, how has this team been able to find so much success late in games this season?

TODD GOLDEN: Leadership, experience. I talk about Will, Walt and Alijah a ton. They're a huge reason why. We've been in some tight games late over the course of our full season, not that many, to be honest, probably five or six.

The thing that gives me great confidence as a head coach is we go in these huddles, under eight or under four, and I'm looking at these guys -- I go back to the Carolina game. The first time we were down four, and I'm looking at Will's eyes. He feels super comfortable, like there's not any sort of lack of confidence being exuded by these guys in those moments. Obviously we come back, we win that game. We've done it a number of times now.

These guys just expect to win. They've had a lot of individual success, a lot of team success now at this point in their career. They're veterans in the college game. They've earned the confidence in which they show by the work they put in.

I lean on our senior-year leaders to take us home.

Q. Four years ago you were hunched over a laptop doing a presentation called Analytics in Basketball and Winning in the Margins while you were at San Francisco. How have you used that identity of analytics to revolutionize this Florida program? Why was that such an important part of your basketball journey from the very start?

TODD GOLDEN: The way we operate our program at Florida is truly like identical in many ways to what we've done at San Francisco, even what we did at Columbia with Kyle Smith. We talk about we think smart wins, we try to run and operate our program like it's a business, like we hire staffing to do different roles, we recruit players to assume different roles.

In a game that is changing dramatically by the year, I think it's as important now than ever to be on the cutting edge of just kind of having an analytical mindset in the way you approach what you do on a day-to-day basis.

I think it's helped us a ton. Obviously we've had a lot of success. We try to use that analytical mindset to put these guys in good positions to be successful, to teach the way we want to play the game, without nerding out too much and annoying these guys with different comments, even though it happens sometimes. I know that's the case. I just think again, overarching theme, we're just trying to be as efficient as we can in everything we do.

Q. I was wondering, does that analytical approach inform what y'all as a program do in the transfer portal? It's hard to evaluate guys, if they performed in a mid-major, can they perform in the SEC?

TODD GOLDEN: We definitely approach transfer portal guys analytically to start. The first thing we want to do is make sure they're good enough to help us on the floor.

Once we're able to identify that... It's more than just numbers on that. We're filtering guys I would say by numbers, then we're watching them and seeing what we think.

After we kind of clear that hurdle, it kind of goes to learning who they are as a person, how they operate, what they're about, what their family is like, if we feel like they'd be good fits as Gators.

This guy sitting next to me was the first one, man, the first one that we saw him hit the portal. We looked at his numbers at Belmont, incredibly efficient as a freshman, high-usage player, great rebounding rates, great steal rates, great block rates.

We meet with him in Nashville. The kid is an incredible light bulb, incredible human being. We get him down to campus and meet his father, Al, and his mother, Helen. We're like if we can get 13 Will Richards on this roster, we're going to make the Final Four. We don't have 13 Wills, but we have 13 great guys, and they're part of the reason why we're here right now.

Q. Knocking off Auburn's win streak at their own home, now essentially you are preparing for their revenge game, what is your mindset for this game going in?

WILL RICHARD: Definitely just win the game. We know they're a great program. We have to come in and play a complete game for 40 minutes, do what we do, make the effort plays, be nails on defense and lock down on offense. Executing at a high level.

Q. Will, obviously Coach Golden talks so highly of you. They went and they took an opportunity to bring you into the game a couple years ago. What does that feel like for you? How do you manage that responsibility to your coaches and the program knowing that they took a shot on me, how can I pay that back?

WILL RICHARD: It feels great. I mean, since I entered the portal, Florida stood out the most, Coach Golden stood out the most to me. Playing for Florida, it means a lot. Being on the team, wearing that Gator logo, it means everything. We're paying them back by winning. You want to win at a high level, get Florida back to national relevance. We've done a great job of doing that, but we know there's more left to do.

Q. For either one of y'all. You mentioned getting Florida and this program back to the pinnacle of the sport. It's been about 15, 20 years. Anybody from

those back-to-back title teams, Coach Donovan, Joakim Noah, anybody reached out?

WILL RICHARD: Yeah, I mean, Taurean Green, him being a part of our program, he's meant a lot. Feel like last year when we did the TBT, talking to Corey Brewer, Coach Donovan, it definitely means a lot to talk to them and know what it takes to get to give their back to the point of what they were. Just knowing what it took to get there.

We definitely have talked to a lot of different people.

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, the same. A guy with really great messages, Coach Donovan. Al Horford has been supportive during our run. A lot of those guys that were on the back-to-back teams. Even guys that played over the last 10 years, Chandler Parsons is a guy that reached out quite a bit over the past couple weeks. So excited for the success we're having.

For us, we're just really prideful and proud of the fact that Florida basketball obviously has some very high-level kind of gatekeepers, people that have been part of this program when it's at its best. Now that we're back in the Final Four, we feel like we can kind of become part of that family.

Q. This team has been a part of four double-digit comebacks this season. You're coming off one against Texas Tech. Will, what's the perspective on the floor when you're down 10? Coach, what are you telling them in the huddle?

WILL RICHARD: I feel like with our team, if there's time left on the clock, we have a chance to give ourselves a chance to win, just with how resilient we are, how we can fight through adversity. As long as there is time on the clock, we can give ourselves a chance to win. I feel like that is what makes this team special, how hard we're going to fight till the end knowing we don't want to lose a game.

TODD GOLDEN: Using the Texas Tech game as an example, talk about the way Will and his teammates have unwavering confidence. I'm not as confident in those moments. I'm talking to them at the under four, We got to play pretty dang perfect down the stretch if we want to find a way to win this game.

We had just missed a blockout against Texas Tech. They get a rebound, they're going to the foul line. We talked again about we have to do everything we can down the stretch here to not allow ourselves off the hook in any way. Fortunately these guys were able to do that against Texas Tech.

Hopefully on Saturday, we don't have to have those types



of conversations down the stretch. Hopefully it's more about, We got to finish this game the right way, let's play to win and to not lose, et cetera.

We'll see how it goes tomorrow and go from there.

Q. I wanted to say that you seem very comfortable in those situations. It's impressive to watch this group stay so poised.

TODD GOLDEN: I appreciate it, thank you.

Q. Will, can you just talk a little bit about Walter Clayton, his ability to hit tough shots, help the team bounce back, your confidence in him.

WILL RICHARD: It's special seeing how poised he is in those moments, how comfortable he is taking big shots. Goes back to who he is. I feel like we have seen it since he got in here, his work ethic, how much he puts into the game. It's good to see him go out there and show everybody else what we already know.

Q. Will, how does it feel to be recognized as having one of the best back courts in the nation?

WILL RICHARD: It feels good. Of course, I mean, you put the work in to get that type of recognition. We also know we have an elite front court, too. They do a great job of helping us win games. I feel like they are just as elite as our back court. I feel like we lead as a group.

Q. Coach Golden, obviously you and Bruce Pearl go way back. What does it mean for you now to be mano-a-mano against him?

TODD GOLDEN: It's special. Someone you care a lot about, someone that has been so impactful to my life, both basketball-wise and off the court, someone that I worked with over 10 years ago. To now kind of full circle, opportunity to be head coach at an incredible place like Florida, now competing against your mentor and one of year best friends, for a trip to go to the national championship game, it's pretty special. Just grateful for the opportunity.

Q. Y'all have talked about the work ethic and character you look for in your players. What does it mean to wear the Gator logo?

WILL RICHARD: I just feel like put in the program beginning over yourself, just giving up yourself for the greater good of the program. Going out there and fighting for 40 minutes every time you step on the court, playing for each other, having fun doing it, just trying to win games.

TODD GOLDEN: I think the biggest thing for us, both as our players and our staff, is I think to a man in our program, everybody is grateful to be at Florida. That's the best way to say it. Nobody feels like they've settled. Nobody feels like there might have been better opportunities elsewhere for us.

From my opportunity three years ago to become the head coach, from Will's opportunity to evaluate a bunch of other places, he was excited to go to Florida. I feel like we have a roster full of guys that have that same mentality, coaching staff that has that same mentality.

When you have people pulling the same direction, you can do some special things. I tell these guys all the time, our individual talent on the roster is really good, all of our players are really good, but the thing that separates us in my humble opinion is what we call our team talent, the way our guys play together, the way they lift each other up, make each other better.

These guys don't care who gets the individual credit on a certain night because they understand if we win, they're going to get the credit we deserve. That's definitely carried us to have the year we have, in my opinion.

Q. I know Will touched on it in regards to beating a team twice, it's so hard in sports to beat a good team twice. What do you look to see your team execute in order to win tomorrow?

TODD GOLDEN: Obviously we played a good game against them the first time. Hard to beat a really good team twice, for sure. Good thing is we only have to beat them one more time. We already beat them once. Got to clip them tomorrow night.

For us, we're at the level where I believe we have to do a great job scouting Auburn. Our teams know each other really well at this point. We are going to show these guys what we call our keys in personnel probably three more times before the ball goes in the air.

I would venture to guess Will could tell you player by player right now the tendencies that each of these Auburn players have, what they like to run, whether it is out of bounds, halfcourt, on the sidelines. That's more of us as coaches covering our butts saying you were prepared to do these things.

We have to play hard, defend well, be physical, rebound well, we have to be strong with the ball and take care of it, just do the things we've done all year to make us really, really consistent.

The great thing is we have shot-makers on the team, and you have to make shots to win the game.

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