

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

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Alamodome

Auburn Tigers

Coach Bruce Pearl

Dylan Cardwell

Semifinals Pregame Media Conference



I don't want to hear it, that just because of anti-Semitism, racism, profiling, you can't be anything you want to be. Yes, there are going to be challenging and obstacles.

For three Jewish coaches and Kelvin Sampson, all of us, to be able to get here, you work hard, you do the right things, you surround yourself with great people, and anybody can be anything in this country because we live in the greatest country in the world.

There is great history and tradition in the game of basketball in the Jewish community because all it took was just one ball and maybe a basket in the inner cities, in the ghettos, and neighborhoods with most of American Jewry lived in this century. We played basketball. Pretty good at it. There's a history there.

Specifically I'm really proud of Todd and really proud of Jon for being young Jewish coaches. Wearing their faith on their sleeves, they both played professionally in Israel, and they're both young mensches. It's easier to be an old mensch than it is to be a young mensch these days.

I did help found the Jewish Coaches Association many years ago. One of our first meetings was in San Antonio. The idea was simply there weren't that many, and I wanted to give these younger guys that were in GA positions or former players who are kind of getting started a little bit of hope that they could be successful as teachers and as mentors and as ministers, in this case in the game of basketball.

I was very pleased to help found the Jewish Coaches Association. Now to see it under Matt Elkin and Scott Garson, Jason Belzer, really doing a nice job.

Q. I had an opportunity to speak to you pre-season and talk about the non-conference schedule that you had put together and you feel like that was because of the team you had coming back. Looking back on it now, a lot of those games you scheduled, draw the connection to how that paid off to get you to where you are right now in the Final Four.

BRUCE PEARL: Will do.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the head coach of Auburn, Bruce Pearl.

Coach, we'll ask for a statement, then take questions.

BRUCE PEARL: I've seen enough Florida tape to make me sick (smiling). They're really good.

You're still in a state of, Are we really here? Are we really one of the four teams that are playing for a national championship? Obviously the answer is yes.

Sometimes it's harder to do what you're expected to do. I suppose because we've been good all year long, this was expected.

But, boy, if you ever treat it that way, you're missing out on something. That is beyond special. We recognize we're going to have to play the two best games of the year in order to be successful and cut down nets on Monday night.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we'll start with questions.

Q. Away from the actual basketball. You talk about how special it is to be here. You're one of three Jewish coaches leading teams into the highest-profile event in college sports right now. What does that mean to you at this time? What is the impact and the importance of the Jewish Coaches Association in the past and going forward?

BRUCE PEARL: I think it speaks to the fact that we live in the greatest country in the world. I always tell my players that there are going to be obstacles to success, but not roadblocks.

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I want to finish your question. I wear this all the time, and it's a dog tag to bring the hostages home. I don't always wear it outside because I want it close to my heart. But this is another opportunity to remind the world that there are Americans, Edan Alexander, still held hostage. We're praying any day now he might get released. Just a reminder that while we're all celebrating this incredible championship here in San Antonio, there's tremendous suffering going on in the Middle East, and we pray for peace and the hostages to come home. If the hostages are released, the death and the dying will stop.

I want to give my assistant, Mike Burgomaster, credit for putting our schedule together. Yes, we did look at a group of seniors and recognized we had the chance to have a pretty good team, so let's just schedule up.

I think the other thing is that the metrics with Quad 1 opportunities was something that we looked at. If you remember a year ago, we had a really, really good season, but we didn't have that many Quad 1 wins. Some really great programs that we played in the non-conference didn't have great years. It actually hurt our seeding a year ago. We just said we're not going to do that again, we're going to play as tough a schedule as you possibly can.

The thing you risk is that you're not going to be successful, then the kids lose confidence in themselves and what we do. But of course this year, that wasn't the case. I just think two things, a couple things. I want to thank Kelvin Sampson for being willing to play us and think that Auburn coming to Houston would be a good thing to help his team get prepared for the season.

The other one I would like to thank also would be Matt Painter at Purdue. He just got done playing for a national championship, yet he was willing to bring his Purdue Boilermakers down to Birmingham to start a neutral-neutral because we're going back up to Indiana next year.

In other words, for Kelvin Sampson and for Matt Painter to think that a game against Auburn was going to be something that would help them tells me that we've got our program where I dreamed we'd get our program.

Q. You use the word 'trust' a lot you have with this team in particular. Chad was just talking about how much he likes the fact that he can stand up on the bench and call things out during a game, call things out during practice. How valuable is having that mindset throughout the team, especially this time of year, where every possession counts and you guys are trying to win a championship?

BRUCE PEARL: Which Chad?

Trust is important. If you in coaching and teaching, even in parenting, if you are able to earn the trust of these younger people, particularly in athletics, they will run through a wall for you.

If you break that trust, if you're not honest with them, doesn't mean you're right. It's not about being right or wrong, it's about having them trust that you have their best interests at heart, that you're going to mentor them, teach them, hold them accountable. One way you trust them is you let them be themselves. You don't change their personalities. Not everybody has to be molded in the same way. If people misunderstand that, that's their problem.

We do let Chad Baker-Mazara be himself. As a result, it has the opportunity to bring out the best in him sometimes as a player.

The other thing is, players have got to make sacrifices. If you're going to be part of a team, you've got to be accountable to the other guys on the team, you got to share the basketball. Some nights it's going to be your night, some nights not. When it's not, you have to trust the process and your teammates.

I can't tell you how many times all season long, look to the guy to your right, left. If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't be here or wouldn't have won that game. You begin to rely on each other which helps to build that trust.

Q. If you can think back to what you were like as a kid in Massachusetts, what it would have meant to you, how it would have mattered to see three Jewish head coaches in a Final Four.

BRUCE PEARL: I would have thought that it would have been Larry Brown, Hubie Brown, and if they had another brown, that Brown. Or not everybody knows that Guy Lewis at Houston was Jewish. It wasn't something that got a lot of attention back in the day, I don't think. There have been others.

I'm going to think as a young Jewish boy growing up in Boston, I would have been proud. But I also think back then it would have been a surprise to some of my peers that weren't Jewish. They may have been like, There's no way that would be the case, because obviously we're not athletic enough. That's not the stereotype.

There is a stereotype about teaching, you know? Jesus was a rabbi. What is the definition of a rabbi? It's teacher. So that's part of my heritage.

My Hebrew name is Mordechai. If you know the story of Purim, Mordechai, he taught his niece, Queen Esther, if she did not reach out to the King somehow, Haman was going to have his way, and there would have been another holocaust and genocide of the Jewish people.

Silence is complicity in many ways for me and obviously what I stand for. I think that's something that I'm proud as a Jewish man.

Q. I want to ask about Denver. You get him out of the portal. He comes in as a scorer. He becomes one of your better perimeter defenders. What has made him so good defensively?

BRUCE PEARL: Denver was a bucket getter, leading scorer in Conference USA. He's still a bucket getter. But he also recognized that the level of athlete, the level of speed and quickness -- I mean, two years ago, he couldn't even dream of guarding Walter Clayton. Now he's going to give it a go. Like few, he's got a shot to be able to guard him with some help.

Denver recognized that he had to work on his lower body, on his core. He had to make it a priority. So he got in the weight room. He got on the slide boards, he got stronger. He was already blessed with a pretty good bucket. I always tell those guys that can sit down and get a nice big bucket, there's power in their legs. Denver has developed some power there.

As a result of what he's done, he's made himself an incredibly valuable player. Coach Golden talked about him yesterday about being one of the more underrated players in the tournament.

Denver is going to play a lot of professional basketball in his career because he can get buckets, which he always was able to do. Now he can guard anybody.

Q. Johni talked about how he's been overlooked his whole life. What has that done as a player? When you recruit, how much do you value guys that have been overlooked?

BRUCE PEARL: I think valuing guys that have been overlooked, you bring them into a place like Auburn... Here is the deal. I spoil my kids, but I will slap the rotten right out of them. I spoil my players, but I will slap the rotten right out of them.

When you get a guy that is overlooked and you spoil him, he's more appreciative and grateful for the opportunity. He goes to work every single day trying to prove people

wrong.

Even all season long, when we've been ranked, I have not allowed people to play the favorite card. All the teams that are here, Houston has history, tradition of winning Final Fours, being here before. Billy Donovan won some. Todd has them back. Duke speaks for itself.

I don't want to say this is our one shining moment, because we've had a couple, but this is rare. We are still going to play that undercard card [sic]. We still have two more opportunities hopefully to prove that we're a great basketball team.

Q. I'm going to ask you to speculate a little bit. Would Johni have been the same player if he would have started at an Auburn, in a power conference, or did he need that experience at Morehead to fuel what he has become?

BRUCE PEARL: Certainly benefited from the experience at Morehead, no question. In answer to your question, because I know what kind of a competitor is, regardless of where he started, he would have done what he's doing right now because he is a great competitor.

He's got a combination of an inner confidence and a little bit of a chip on his shoulder. I think the biggest thing is, like, he's always been second-guessed, whether it was out of high school, even in the OVC. Coming to Auburn he wasn't fast enough, quick enough, didn't jump high enough, the game wouldn't translate, his lack of athleticism.

They're wrong. I think the same thing is going to be true when it comes to the NBA. There's a lot of clubs that won't draft him because he's not the prototypical jumper. I know a lot of great jumpers that are bad athletes. Johni Broome is a great athlete that doesn't jump very high.

Q. I spoke with your former manager, Michael Poll. Can you quickly tell about that friendship and that relationship you have with him during your time at Milwaukee.

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah, Michael was working in the cafeteria at UW Milwaukee busing tables. He was working in a job because he had some challenges. I remember when I would walk into the cafeteria, Michael's personality just, boom, exploded. I can remember so many times that the manager of the cafeteria would get upset with Michael because his job wasn't to have big personality, meet-and-greet, make everybody else's day, make everybody feel welcome and serve. His job was to clean up tables. He was in the wrong job.

As a coach, my job is to put my players in positions to be successful. I said this is not his strength. So somehow I met his family, his parents. I said, Don't get me wrong, your son is incredibly talented. I want him to come over to the athletic department, over to the Klotsche Center, I want him to help be like our team manager, help our equipment guy, our weight room guy, be a greeter, help us in recruiting.

I don't know. 2005, I guess 20 years later, he's still at UW Milwaukee. He's way more famous than me. They'll never name anything for me at UWM. He's been there 20 years. They should name the court after him. Michael Poll, one of my managers.

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Dylan Cardwell in the interview room. We'll turn to the journalists in the Full Court Press program. Now is your time to raise your hand.

Q. Coach, Tahaad has come off the bench during the tournament, scoring double-digits. How does he impress you as a freshman?

BRUCE PEARL: Two things. Number one, he was raised right in the sense that he's good enough to start, but not one time did we ever see a roll of the eye or a hunch of the shoulder 'cause if he did, his dad who slap that right out of him, for real, for real, in the sense that it's our job as coaches to try to place the players where we feel like we have a chance to be successful. So he respected the coaching and the decisions that were being made.

At the same time, he respected the guys that were starting. He respected Denver and Chad and Miles Kelly and the guys that were starting ahead of him as seniors.

At the same time now, he would not be very happy if he wasn't finishing games. He's been a phenomenal finisher, especially for a freshman. We put him in huge pressure situations, put the ball in his hands, trusted that he could make a play.

He's been a joy to coach. He wants to get better. I think being 5'11", being the underdog, having a little bit of a chip on his shoulder, even though he's from Jersey, has that inner confidence, he still goes out every day to try to prove people that maybe he was ranked a little higher than 25th or 30th best high school player in the country. There aren't 20 high school kids playing college basketball right now better than Tahaad Pettiford. There probably aren't even five high school players, five better freshman in the country.

Q. What things have you seen from your team growth-wise from the previous matchup against

Florida that can lead to a victory tomorrow night?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, I don't know if at that point of the season for some reason we had a little bit of a fatigue. Florida came in and played great. They're playing better now. Prior to the Florida game and since, I've been saying they're the best team in college basketball. It's not a knock on my team, Houston or Duke. Clayton has been the best guard on the floor every single night.

Clayton can't be the best guard on the floor tomorrow. Their front line can't be the more aggressive and the more physical tomorrow. If they are, we lose. If they're not, we win.

By the way, guys, you are missing the best interview here. This guy here, you can get me anytime, you guys need to ask. This is the best interview in the country.

Go ahead. I'm sorry.

Q. Obviously you and Coach Golden go way back. There's always that idea when you're a young player, you learn a lot from your coach. Since he's turned into a coach at Florida, you've played against him a lot, talked with him behind the scenes. What have you learned as a basketball coach and how have you become a better coach by competing against him and working side by side with him?

BRUCE PEARL: I think first of all, Todd had a great, great mind. Keep this in mind. When you are getting ready to start a new job and you choose the men or women that you want to surround yourself with, I chose my son Steven. I chose Todd Golden to be on my first staff to help me get things started at Auburn.

Obviously it says everything about his character, about his work ethic, about his intellect, so on, so forth. Todd is his own man. When he first started coaching, he didn't do a lot of things that we did on the floor because his foundation was Randy Bennett, Coach Smith, other coaches he was around.

I'm sure he took notice of how we built the staff, how we treated the players, how we got people to play hard, obviously how we worked.

What I've learned from Todd is to pay attention to the analytics, to pay attention to what the numbers said. Mike Burgomaster, offensive coordinator, Steven Pearl is my defensive coordinator, pay very close attention to the analytics. I'm sure they share that with something they got working with Todd.

Q. Dylan, after you fouled out in the Alabama game, you went straight to the bench and prayed. I'd love to know what role does faith play, even when practiced differently, into the success of this Auburn team?

DYLAN CARDWELL: First and foremost, all glory to my Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. Christian, Judaism might have our differences, we believe in the same God. It's been great to see and encouraging to see I am under a coach who just is so vocal about his own faith, but allows us to pursue our own. He encourages us to be vocal about it.

The role faith plays on this team is the biggest role possible. We wouldn't be here without. It is a huge catalyst for us because of all the games we've been in. We've been in 10 to 11 one-possession games, and we've only lost one of 'em. I guess it was the Alabama game at home, which kind of sucked to go through. It's just encouraging to see.

We wouldn't be as humble as we are, we wouldn't be as connected as we are without faith. I'll give you an example. Continue to talk about Bruce Pearl. He encourages us to have these breakfasts, but also he encourages us to have Bible study. I've never seen a coach like him to encourage these things. We wouldn't be able to connect with each other in a deeper level outside of basketball.

The word of our year has been 'sacrifice'. You won't know sacrifice if you don't know Jesus Christ. He's the one who died for all of our sins. That's the reason we've had this level of urgency lately is because we understand that our sacrifice is the potential to play for a national championship and win a national championship, not just for own glory, not just for the glory of ourselves, but for our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. But also win a national championship for this university and Bruce Pearl. I've been here for five years, he has showed me the ropes to be a great Auburn man. Every time I'm praying, I'm always praying for a national championship, to win it for Bruce Pearl. He earned it, deserves it.

I'm grateful to be on this stage, to play for and serve a coach like Bruce Pearl, and I am grateful to God who led me to Auburn. That is why I have stayed here for five years, because I love God, I love Auburn, not most importantly, but importantly I do love Bruce Pearl.

BRUCE PEARL: (Tearing up).

Q. Take me through what you learned from 2019's experience and what is one major lesson you can apply to this year to get you over the hump?

BRUCE PEARL: I like being in the warm weather of San Antonio versus the freezing cold of Minneapolis. That's one thing I've learned.

The incredible number of obligations prior to the game with media and things like that. One of the things we went through yesterday in practice was we had put in a couple of looks that we hadn't run for a while. It was amazing how everybody forgot them yesterday.

The reason is they got a lot going on. Like, their minds are going. The social media is going. The obligations that we have. The gifts.

We got a game. We got to lock in and focus. Having been there before, it was so good to go through a few things yesterday and watch them forget everything. They went, Oh, my gosh. It was good, because now I think today they're going to be more locked in, just be ready to try to play this basketball game.

We recognize that we got to have something special tomorrow. We talk about it a lot. If you're going to win. Especially with the way the field is right now. These are the best four teams in college basketball. I don't care who your fifth team is. I don't care. They don't belong here. These four teams have earned it all year long. It's not a knock on anybody else. It's a compliment to all these team, all these coaches and programs.

Q. With the nature of the NCAA tournament, single elimination, you've been here, Dylan, five years, coach, 11 years, take us through coaching or playing in March Madness and how it could all be over within 40 minutes of basketball.

DYLAN CARDWELL: Yeah, I think our coaching staff does a great job of scouting, having us ready. At the end of the day we can't control if our shots go in, we can't control what the other team does. We can control, like Bruce Pearl always talks about, we can control our effort and energy, make sure we have the most effort on the court, being relentless. That's been the MO of our past four games, being relentless.

We don't really go into games saying, This is an elimination game. You can't win a game like that. We segment our games. We just try to be present, be where our feet are, focus on the game, the things we did control. Like I say, we can't control what a ref calls. Making sure we are proud and ready to play. No different than the regular season. We had the craziest non-conference, craziest schedule in scheduling history.



We have been primed for this position, we're primed for the opportunity that's in front of us. It's no different than any other game we played. We don't address the elephant in the room as far as this is an elimination game. Feel like every game we played is an elimination game. We played in Maui. We played at Houston. Every game we played... We played at Duke, Alabama, all these crazy quad one games. Every game we played, it was a must-win game for us. This is just no different.

THE MODERATOR: Coach?

BRUCE PEARL: I think the one thing you do is you give the guys a game plan saying if we do these things, we will win. If they do these things...

Not doing these things are going to be easy. But I want the guys to feel like they're in control of their destiny. I don't want them worrying about if we don't necessarily do this, it's over, we don't play again.

I think where Dylan has compartmentalized it really well, I like free breakfasts. Quite frankly, I'm not done having free breakfasts, do you? If we lose tomorrow, breakfast isn't free anymore. It is humorous, but it's real.

Our guys have kind of bought into that. They like free breakfast, too.

THE MODERATOR: Dylan, do you have a specific comment on the breakfast?

DYLAN CARDWELL: I want to give a shout-out to Emily Daniels, who is our nutritionist. She does a great job of choosing our team breakfasts. Every hotel we've stayed at has been first class, five-star meals. So shout-out breakfast (smiling).

Q. Dylan, how is the faith you're able to be so open about?

DYLAN CARDWELL: The Lord is very, man, hands-on in how He authors your life. There's a verse in Jeremiah that says, Before you were created in your mother's womb, before you were formed, I knew you. Another verse in Jeremiah says, I know the plans I have for you, the plans that give you hope in the future.

As much as my journey has been up and down at Auburn, as frustrating, there was a time in my have life where I questioned God on why He brought Bruce Pearl into my life. It's just been so crazy to be patient and to see that Bruce Pearl is the most significant coach I'll probably ever play for.

Like I said, he's given me an example of how to carry myself. We never really had these conversations. We had a heart-to-heart last year that helped us become friends.

I want to give him his flowers now so he can still smell them. He showed me the road to be an Auburn man. He showed me it's okay and admirable to be as open as you are about your faith. As you can see, he's very open about his faith and the hostage situation going on in Israel. I just follow his example.

Everything that I feel and I have the heart for, the Lord is in my heart, I'm very open about it, open about the Lord, about my family.

But if it wasn't for the Lord giving me Bruce Pearl as an example, I mean, I'd be like every player in the country playing basketball and only being an athlete. Shout-out to BP again.

BRUCE PEARL: I'm going to follow up with one thought.

I don't know exactly where I learned this along the way. I think my wife Brandy helped me understand this.

One of the biggest ways you can hurt somebody's feelings, not be mad at 'em, not be jealous of 'em, envious of 'em, angry at 'em, it's to ignore them, ignore them.

I don't want my players to ignore their father God. I don't. I want them to visit with Him. I want them to be on to Him. He wants to be a part of their life, part of the solution, not part of the problem.

I remember growing up Jewish, there were a lot of things that we do in prayer that were holy. The bima was holy, Torah, scrolls were placed in a very holy place. We'd put a prayer shawl on and cover our head. It wasn't the holy of holies, but it was very significant.

I grew up kind of thinking, Man, God is awfully busy. I just think I don't want to bother Him. Brandy said to me, let me ask you a question. She said, If there was something that your father could do for you, but you didn't want to ask him because you thought he was too busy, I'm talking about my dad. Why didn't you come to me? Why didn't you ask me?

That's what the Lord is. He just wants you to come to Him, wants to ask Him, wants you to visit with Him. That's what I've tried to instill in the players.

Then have the courage of sharing their faith and also the respecting of other faiths, necessarily this not being the only way. That's what we try to deal with.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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