

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

Saturday, April 5, 2025

San Antonio, Texas, USA

Alamodome

Florida Gators

Coach Todd Golden

Walter Clayton Jr.

Thomas Haugh

Alijah Martin

Will Richard

Semifinals Postgame Media Conference

Florida 79, Auburn 73

THE MODERATOR: We're joined by the head coach of the Florida Gators, Todd Golden, and student-athletes. We'll ask Coach Golden to begin with an opening statement, then take questions.

TODD GOLDEN: Just so, so proud of my team, my players, my staff. Just done an incredible job all year with their preparation and approach on a daily basis. Obviously a great accomplishment for our program to make it here to the Final Four.

But the heart and just toughness both physically, mentally that these guys showed today was incredible. Credit Auburn. Obviously an incredible team, one of the best college basketball teams in the past couple decades. You all know how much I love Bruce and Steven and their program.

With that being said, I'm incredibly proud of these guys for getting this win. We're alive, man. We're playing for this national championship on Monday night.

THE MODERATOR: Question for the Florida student-athletes first.

Q. Will and Thomas, what is Walter like in those moments when your back is against the wall and he turns it on the way he did today?



WILL RICHARD: I mean, I feel like everybody sees it. He's poised, calm and collected, confident in himself. We have that confidence in him. We see him practice, see his work ethic. We're glad everybody else is getting to see him do it in a game.

THOMAS HAUGH: Similar answer. He's incredible. On and off the court he's a great dude. We trust him in those situations. He knocks down big shots day after day, so...

Q. Walter, took you till about the last eight minutes against UConn, then the last four against Texas Tech to really take control of the game. Was the object of this game to make it happen sooner?

WALTER CLAYTON JR.: No. Me personally, I just let the game come to me. I know I got a bunch of other guys around me who are threats also. If you try to double me, Tommy hit that three in the first half, loosened up their defense a little bit, they went away from me. Just read and reacting to the defense. I know I got weapons around me.

Q. I think we're all out of ways to describe Walter's game. Specifically we can't compare him to Steph Curry anymore because Steph never did it on this stage. What is one word you would describe his game?

WILL RICHARD: I'll just say special, to be honest. He's special.

THOMAS HAUGH: Special.

ALIJAH MARTIN: Special (laughter).

Q. Walter, take me through your assertiveness down the stretch. 71-68, that three-point play. What you saw to break down the defense.

WALTER CLAYTON JR.: Yeah, they was kind of showing hard all night. So I think it was Cardwell left a little early, I was able to get the shot up. Tommy had hit down, knocked down one of those top of the key threes. That kind of forced them not to stay as long on me. Tommy, all



of them were making plays.

Like I said, the guys around me making plays allows my game to open up and I appreciate 'em.

Q. Walter, you were saying yesterday your introduction to March Madness was watching Kemba 14 years ago. What was it about that that drew you in? Do you think you're doing a pretty good imitation of him?

WALTER CLAYTON JR.: I wouldn't say imitation. I try to be my own person.

But yeah, man, Kemba on one of the biggest stages was calm, cool and collected. Just watching that, I kind of admired that. He was able to just zone himself out, just play his game.

Q. Thomas and Alijah, I think they were pretty much having their way 73% in the two-point area in the first half. Cut it in half in the second half. What did you do or talk about at halftime to try to settle in and do something about what they were doing?

THOMAS HAUGH: Well, for me, Walt kind of got our bigs together at halftime and gave us a nice little pep talk.

That's not the game of basketball, that's not the style of basketball we played at the beginning, out-physical us. That gave us extra motivation. Coach Hartman got on us a lot at halftime, too. That helped a lot going into that second half.

ALIJAH MARTIN: Yeah, we know what we need to do. We just had to trust each other, play harder, get the job done.

Q. Walter, 11 of 18, 34 points. Talk about what it's been like for you doing what you've done in the SEC this year?

WALTER CLAYTON JR.: Honestly, to be honest with you, I don't really, like -- I guess you could say I haven't really had time to reflect on what I've been doing. I've just been focused on us winning game, winning games with these guys. I haven't taken the time to reflect back on the season yet.

Q. Alijah, what does it feel like right now, obviously still one more to go, but you got this past round? Secondly, those dunks, were you intending to fly from the free-throw line?

ALIJAH MARTIN: It feels good getting this win, being back

in the national championship. I don't remember last time that we been here.

Super grateful for these guys. Those dunks, I was just thinking just going to dunk it, honestly.

WALTER CLAYTON JR.: We've been waiting on him all year (laughter).

THE MODERATOR: We'll thank the student-athletes from Florida. We're going to take questions for coach next.

Q. Your team is down 9 two minutes into the second half. On this stage for certain groups, that could lead to somebody or a team getting fazed. That's never been your team once. How much was tonight a testament to the unflappability of this group? Have you ever seen anything like it from a team?

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, to answer your question, in short form, it's 100%. Great example of that.

I thought Auburn played great in the first half. We did some nice things, but we did not have an answer for their physicality in the paint. They were 13 of 18 from two.

The way our game plan, we weren't executing it very well and it wasn't working very well. We get to halftime, Tommy was right, Coach Hartman tried to get us going a little bit. The main message at halftime was we have to get back to doing what we do and executing in a positive way. We scored right out of halftime. I think we got a stop, got the ball back, hit a three to make it 9.

From that point forward I thought we did a good job ever getting back to ourselves. Our bigs did a great job in the second half defending and rebounding. We ended up plus-11 on the glass, plus-9. We were down 1 at halftime.

We did a great job of guarding Johni one-on-one in the second half. I think he was 1-4 from the field. We started getting out in transition a little bit, saw the ball go through the basket, started gaining some confidence. We obviously played a really, really good second half.

I think it starts with our perimeter. Walt, Will and Alijah, senior leaders, guys that have been through the fire a little bit before. Great players with really, really a high level of confidence. They just kind of breathe it into the rest of the team. The younger guys like Rueb and Condo and Tommy, Zel, they have no choice but to play with incredible intensity and urgency because of the tone that our perimeter sets.

Q. You've said all year about starting out the second



half coming out and making a statement early. Talk about that five minutes when y'all outscored them 11 to 2.

TODD GOLDEN: We were able to turn up our pressure a little bit defensively. Got them on their heels offensively. We started just guarding more physically in the paint, making it harder for them to put us in the basket. Got some clean rebounds out in transition.

They controlled the game in the first half. We stuck around and we were hanging in, but we kind of felt like we were getting knocked around a little bit. We controlled the game in the second half.

I thought after the first two minutes of the second half we did that consistently. All three facets -- defending, rebounding, taking care of the ball -- that led to that run and victory.

Q. What do you think was the key for Broome in the second half? Just you guys kind of pushing him out?

TODD GOLDEN: I think it was just a function of our bigs, just in our depth. He had a great first half. We didn't have anybody that could stop him. He was getting to his spots. We stayed the course. We didn't double him.

They're too explosive defensively on the perimeter. They're going to get threes for Kelly, Pettiford, guys that are automatic knockdown shooters. I thought our depth, being able to get Rueben and Condo, sub early, bringing them back, I think we wore them down a little bit.

It was kind of the function of the whole of our group that stepped up and was able to kind of change that defensive effort in the second half.

Q. You're one win away from being able to call yourself a national championship-winning head coach. How does that feel?

TODD GOLDEN: It's pretty incredible, man, you know? We worked pretty hard to get here. In three years, been fortunate to build a great staff that is aligned, that works really hard for each other.

Then we've just accumulated a great group of guys on our roster. It took a little bit to get all these pieces together. But to a man, they all pull the same direction. There's no unselfishness in our locker room. A guy like Walt gets asked all the questions, all the attention for a great effort like tonight, but there's no animosity there, no one concerned about that. These guys are just trying to win a championship. I'm proud of that, proud of what our

program is.

The strides that we've made over these past couple years...

Q. Can you speak to what a great day it's been for Gator basketball. Coach Donovan gets into the Hall of Fame. Also you've said you want to restore Gator basketball to that level.

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, it's incredible. I actually saw Coach Donovan kind of behind our bench right before the second half started. I was thinking how amazing it was that he's here, a guy that is the face of Florida basketball, had such an amazing career in Gainesville, and obviously after. What he was able to do. He raised the bar pretty high at Florida. There's some pretty high expectations now because of what he was able to do in his time there.

He deserves the honor of being a Hall of Fame coach. So that was pretty special. Then obviously us winning. It was funny 'cause I got in the locker room today, I looked at my phone, I had a text from my dad. It was a picture of him and Billy D's dad right next to each other on the bus on the way to the game. Pretty sweet. Pretty special moment.

Those two have found their match. Neither of them can get enough words in when they're together (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: We congratulate and thank Coach Golden. We'll see you tomorrow.

TODD GOLDEN: Can't wait. Go Gators.

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