

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Auburn vs Houston

Saturday, March 18, 2023

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena

**Auburn Tigers**

**Coach Bruce Pearl**

**Allen Flanigan**

**Zep Jasper**

**Jaylin Williams**

Media Conference

Houston - 81, Auburn - 64

THE MODERATOR: We will have an opening comment from Coach Pearl and then take questions for the players.

COACH PEARL: I wish it was a 20-minute game instead of a 40-minute game. You know, we were ready to play. The kids were ready to play. Steven Pearl had the game plan, did a great job with our defensive game plan. And we got great looks in the first half. Ran whatever we wanted. And played great basketball. In the second half, I don't think our guys were -- we were as prepared for how aggressive they would be. I'm sure that Kelvin jumped all over them at halftime and just lit them up. And they came out and they guarded us much harder, much better. And then we -- we didn't respond to it. In other words, we probably anticipated that's how they got us in the first half and then deal with it. It actually worked to our disadvantage because that's how we expected them to play from the beginning. And when it was so easy in the first half, I think there was a chance we thought that's how it was going to be for the rest of the game, because we were dominated in the second half on both ends of the floor.

THE MODERATOR: Players only, please.

**Q. Guys, a pretty emotional end to a long season for you guys. You know, what are your thoughts on maybe you having played your last game as college basketball players?**

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: The experience was great. This is



Zep's last game in college. I mean, I wish we could have won for him and competed at our best for Zep. Because you know for college he doesn't have another year. You know, we just keep moving on to the next play. That's what Coach always say.

ALLEN FLANIGAN: Same thing. Jaylin said, for real. This was Zep's last ride. He doesn't have a COVID year to use. Like me and Jaylin who got another year. For us to go out there and put it all out there on the court, try to get a win and keep the season going, we came up short tonight.

ZEP JASPER: Hats off to Houston. Like Coach B.P. said, they came out, was aggressive second half. You know, it's my last game. I love these dudes. I love the coaching staff. The walk-ons. The AD. Everyone at Auburn. They are Auburn men forever. This ain't the end. We're coming back next year. Like I said, it's going to be Auburn forever. I cherish this moment. I cherish the fans. My family.

**Q. What were they able to do differently in the second half, particularly defensively, and there was a long stretch when you guys couldn't get a bucket or sometimes get a shot off?**

ALLEN FLANIGAN: Second half we missed box outs. They got offensive rebounds, second chance points, and they lined us up and drove us and got some mid-range shots. They was able to knock down their mid-range shots.

**Q. You two obviously have a COVID year. Have you given any thought whether you are going to use it or not?**

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: I haven't really thought much about it you, know. I'm locked into what's now -- what was now. So now I will think more about it, and talk with my mom and my family, and talk with B.P., and see what's best for me and what's going to work out. Never really thought much about it.

ALLEN FLANIGAN: Same. We was focused, locked-in on the season. Wasn't thinking about what's next for us. We was locked in on the season trying to expand the season and keep going and keep playing with this team. Now that



this has come to an end, sit down and talk to coach, and talk to my family and make a decision.

**Q. How tough is it when the free throws aren't falling and how do you kind of overcome them?**

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: All it is, is free throws are just concentration. You could be tired or whatever, but like, you have ten seconds to shoot a free throw. That's on all of us. I missed one, a few guys missed a few. We make our free throws, we're battling to win the game.

**Q. James, as B.P. said in the first half you were getting a lot of good looks, ran whatever you wanted. What was clicking for you guys so well to be playing with such confidence in the first half against a defense like that.**

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: Sticking together. After the first 10 minutes, 5 minutes, they were pretty much gassed. We were probably tired too, but we kept pushing ourselves and we always talk about pushing each other through fatigue. We just kept competing and just competed well.

**Q. Congratulations on a career. You were at Auburn during such a transformational time for Auburn basketball and the school. What was that like to experience and how are you going to take that away?**

ZEP JASPER: It was a great experience. Coming in with, you know, Wendell, Waler Kessler, Jabari Smith, a couple other guys. We made history. We was number one in the country. Won a regular season championship, which we didn't predict. We came in, worked hard, and did it. And then we made history again by making the tournament, you know, going in the Round of 32. It's been a hell of a ride. I appreciate Auburn so much.

**Q. Guys, can you talk about what it was like having the fans show up the way they did for you guys at Birmingham, essentially a home-court advantage. The fans showed up, and they were loud the whole time. Can you talk about the fan support?**

ALLEN FLANIGAN: Man, they show up every time. The fans, they come in packs. They come deep, show up. They cheer us on. They cheer us whether we lose or win. They're there every time. It's just showing their support. And we can't express a thank you enough to the fans for all they do.

THE MODERATOR: Okay, players, thank you. You are dismissed.

**Q. B.P., you talked about in your opening statement**

**about the way they changed up their defense in the second half. You said they were more aggressive. What all was giving you trouble from what they were doing on the defensive side of the ball.**

COACH PEARL: They guarded us in the second half like we thought they got us all game long. They have great athletes. They pressed up on the ball. They made it really difficult for us to run our offense. They extended catches. And our execution, our spacing, we just weren't sharp. And I don't think we played -- in the first half we had 8 assists and only 2 turnovers. In the second half we had 3 assists and 5 turnovers. We didn't execute, which is not typical. Typical in the second half with the offense in front of our bench, we typically have put up great offensive numbers. So give Houston credit for the way they guarded and their physicality.

**Q. Coach, I know that this is not how you want the season to end, but what you can say was most rewarding about the season here with this team specifically, and what you think Kelvin Sampson has done with the Houston program as well.**

COACH PEARL: I think two things jump out at me. Number one, we're interested in making history. And this team had a good year. And they made the NCAA Tournament. And they advanced in the NCAA Tournament. And added to the history of Auburn basketball by not losing a First Round game. And gave the 1 seed, you know, a pretty good run for 20 minutes. This team's been resilient. It's played the toughest schedule that I've ever played. 17 games against the field. And just kept bouncing back all year long, after tough losses. So you have to admire them. And give them that credit. You know, Kelvin is a great coach and a great teacher. And his teams rely on toughness and physicality and conditioning, and he had a number of players play very heavy minutes. I thought that our bench and the fact that we played 10 and he really only played about 7 could have been a factor for us in the second half. But it didn't turn out that way. They obviously turned it up. I mean, look, Sasser was the best player on the floor. He's a great player. And he rose up and made big shots. Mark was able to take our smaller guards and just back them down and score over them. They matched him up over our smaller guards. He was able to make one-on-one plays and get to the foul line. We missed a lot of free throws, particularly in the second half, that were big factors. Johni Broome did a lot of really good things. I don't think there will be a player that will draw 10 fouls in an NCAA game this year. He drew 10 fouls. That's hard to do. And we did a good job of getting it in there to him, and he got hammered. And obviously, had he been able to finish a few more shots in there, obviously, struggled from the foul line, which was a factor in the second half. But I know he

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

feels terrible. But listen, this team is not here without Johni Broome. We're not an NCAA Tournament team. And that piece of adding him made all the difference in our ability to be able to continue to make history and have a good year.

**Q. B.P., how frustrating is it when the free throws in particular aren't falling? There were several stretches when you guys missed both of them.**

COACH PEARL: Obviously, it's frustrating. But, you know, what's more frustrating is -- that is something you can't control. So things I can do a better job of controlling are, you know -- we just got to recognize that they shot, you know, 50% in the second half. That, you know, they were 4/10 from 3 and they didn't miss a free throw. They were 18/18 from the foul line. In the second half they did everything they needed to do offensively. We couldn't guard them. The guys could look at this or that. They scored 50 points in the second half. That's why they won.

**Q. Coach, ultimately you noted the free-throw disparity. 4/20 from the field in the second half. From a coaching standpoint, what do you feel like you could have done to maybe prepare the team for the inevitable adjustments that Houston made defensively?**

COACH PEARL: You know, I mean, I think we got some pretty good looks. There wasn't a lot of, like -- there wasn't a ton of panic. Maybe a few possessions in the last 5 or 6 minutes when we didn't run. Panic meaning we didn't run anything. Overdribbled. In the second half we drove it downhill and sometimes we got fouled and sometimes they blocked our shot. And in the first half we had much more purpose driving it, passing it. We didn't share the ball in the second half.

**Q. Bruce, I wanted to ask you about Zep with it being his last game. Last couple seasons -- what was the impact he made on this program and his time here.**

COACH PEARL: He won a regular season championship. He was part of a team that was ranked No. 1 in the country. His team this year played the toughest schedule. One of the toughest schedules in college basketball. They were ranked in the top 25 for I don't know how many weeks. And, you know, the way Zep is as a person, the way he is trying to be an Auburn man, I could hardly wait to begin to go to work and start to our donor base and our alums. If Zep is playing his last game and decides he wants to do something else, the Auburn family is going to line up to hire that kid. Line up to hire him. Because he's a winner. He's a hard worker; he's loyal; he's everything -- you know how you, you know, you bring somebody into your organization, your team, your family, you make statements when you bring somebody in like Zep Jasper.

**Q. Coach, I know at this moment it's difficult to reflect on what this team has meant to you as a person, but you talk about history. How has this team left an impact on you?**

COACH PEARL: I'm proud of them, but I also have a pretty high standard. And so I'm grateful, and I want them to feel really good about the fact that they had a good year and, you know, we are grateful for our fan base. I'm grateful for Auburn University and the way they support us, and the way so many people on our staff and the University work so hard to give us a chance to play, you know, in this environment. And I want to thank the NCAA and the committee for helping Birmingham have such a successful weekend by placing us here where our fans could watch us play. And obviously, our fans turned out. So I'm proud of this team. But if you know me, I'm on to the next play. And I'll be recruiting tonight.

**Q. Bruce, congratulations on a successful season. I want to take you back to 2021. How did the decision of Scoot Henderson to choose to play in the G league reshape the ACC? How do you think it changed?**

COACH PEARL: That was pre-NIL. So is there a chance that with NIL Scoot Henderson, Scoot comes to Auburn? Possibly. But he had an opportunity to do something for himself and his family, and he was certainly physically mature enough. But, you know, you could just draw a list of guys that could have been on this team, from Jalen Green to Sharif and Isaac, Walker Jabari. You could have a lot of fun doing that. But they weren't. And this group managed to stay together. I'll tell you, a lot of teams with lesser character -- I think because we had so many tough losses could have fallen apart -- and this team didn't. But we're disappointed. We had the No. 1 seed in this region on their heels. And Houston did the things they needed to to get back in the game, but we helped them.

**Q. Coach, after such a tough loss, bittersweet way to end the season. What lessons do you take from a year like this as you move forward to the next season?**

COACH PEARL: Well, if it's not broke don't fix it. What we do works. We will recognize and honor these guys for their contribution. I'll be shifting gears now helping, you know, the guys that are going to want to take a look at maybe where their draft status could be, we'll look at that. And, you know, within the next week or two get a look at what our roster looks like. If we lose anybody in the transfer portal and begin to rebuild it.

THE MODERATOR: Okay, thank you.

