

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Alabama State vs Auburn

Wednesday, March 19, 2025

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Rupp Arena

Auburn Tigers

Coach Bruce Pearl

Media Conference

THE MODERATOR: At this time we will welcome to Lexington, Auburn Head Coach Bruce Pearl. Coach?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, let's start off by congratulating Alabama State on their victory last night. The state of Alabama is extremely well represented in this tournament. Basketball in the state of Alabama was really good this year, obviously led by Auburn and Alabama, UAB. Troy being in the tournament, Jacksonville State had a great year. North Alabama lost in the championship game. South Alabama probably coulda shoulda been in the NIT.

And Alabama State out of a terrific conference that is known for pulling off huge upsets, if you look at last year, Grambling, Prairie View, Texas Southern, always, pretty much every year, they got a big upset.

So very happy for Tony and the job he and his staff have done taking that Alabama State program. Of course, they're only 45 minutes down the road, so we are very familiar with them. We played them last year, and they actually outplayed us in the second half.

So we know we have our hands full with a very quick, deep, athletic, well-coached basketball team.

Q. Coach, you just brought up the state of Alabama, even Jacksonville State won in the NIT last night. You talk about the teams that are competing, and you're going up against Alabama State. When you look at that as a whole and how that state continues to get better in college basketball, what does that say about the recruiting, about the fans of the state getting into the sport even further? And then the second part of my question, Richie Riley in South Alabama got shafted a little bit when it comes to their invitation and having it rescinded. Just your thoughts?



BRUCE PEARL: I didn't hear the last part of your question about South Alabama.

Q. The NIT.

BRUCE PEARL: The question you asked is really how I started off my statement, just about we're from Auburn, Alabama, and we're playing a team from Montgomery, Alabama. And there are so many really good teams in college basketball from the state, two of the top five or six teams in the country in Auburn and Alabama.

And UAB plays in their championship, North Alabama plays in their championship, Samford was in the tournament a year ago, Troy is in it this year. And obviously the list goes on. I think it's just a commitment from the universities. I think it's a statement about the quality of the coaches that are now in the state of Alabama.

Alabama has always produced a tremendous number of great football players and baseball players and a lot of terrific athletes. And keep in mind in the state of Alabama we have no professional sports at all. So the university system, the colleges, universities get a lot of attention, a lot of notoriety, and so therefore they get a lot of support.

Q. Johni said you watched last night's game together. For a team that went one and out last year, you're the No. 1 overall seed, watching that may be a very fresh reminder that when you are on the court, fates can change like that?

BRUCE PEARL: Absolutely. We talked about our exit from the tournament last year in the 4-13 game against Yale, we talked about it this morning. Yale outplayed us. We shot 50% in the game. Typically that's good enough to win. We fouled them too much. We turned the ball over late, crucial moments, and we didn't make free throws at the end. And as a result, we lost the game.

Anybody can have that one shining moment.

We recognize, again, that Alabama State outplayed us by one in the second half last year in Auburn, Alabama. So we recognize that we will have to play well. I think we have to come into this -- we're not coming into this tournament -- we're looking at the overall No. 1 seed in the rear-view



mirror. We worked hard for that overall No. 1 seed.

To survive the SEC this year as regular season champions, to look at the non-conference and having beaten Houston at Houston, having won the Maui Invitational, lost in a close game at Duke, our only loss in non-conference, and to have beaten Purdue and Ohio State on neutral courts, we earned that through the regular season.

That's in the past right now. We are six wins away from achieving what our real goal is, which is to win the national championship. We recognize that at any stop, including tomorrow, we could lose. We're going to do everything we possibly can to not.

Q. Coach, you talked about it after Selection Sunday, just a historic year for the SEC, having 14 teams in, and we talk about having the No. 1 overall seed. Kind of blocking out all the outside noise, what's been your message to the team this week? We know at any given moment things can change, going back to last year in Spokane, now going back here, having success here in Rupp Arena already this season, how are you helping to push that momentum?

BRUCE PEARL: Take it one game at a time, truly. Defense and rebounding are going to travel. There are going to be some nights we're going to shoot it really well and some nights we are not going to shoot it well. What does Alabama State do to score? How do they score? Understand that. Do the best job we can to prevent that.

They are going to be hard to beat to 50/50 balls. They shoot a lot of threes. Their speed and their quickness are going to allow them to chase shots down. You have inside shots, you have inside rebounds, size matters.

Size doesn't matter when you are shooting half your shots from beyond the three-point line. So they shoot them, they will chase them down. We have to chase those balls down and just do the things that we need to do to beat Alabama State, and offensively just keep sharing the ball.

We have the advantage on the inside. But they're going to come down and double team and strip and rip and be really, really handsy because they're really, really athletic. We have to do a good job protecting the ball. We turned the ball over 18 times last time when we played them. So we recognize they have the ability to turn us over.

Q. Bruce, going back to Greg's early tenure as a commissioner, seemed like there was more investment into men's basketball. Are we seeing this year being a byproduct of that, higher emphasis across a lot of the

institutions to make sure that the men's basketball programs could be better than they were before?

BRUCE PEARL: I think a number of things took place. First of all, Mike Slive called it out years ago when the SEC was not performing as well in men's basketball as all the other sports, men and women, in the SEC. They say it just means more, and I believe that the SEC is the best conference in intercollegiate athletics.

We have not been in men's basketball in a long, long time. What happened? Just a commitment, Mike Slive, Greg Sankey, hiring of some guys that are just focused on basketball. Garth Glissman right now is sort of our czar of basketball. And so there is a real emphasis there. I think the athletic directors have invested in great coaches and resources for their staffs.

And I think the difference between the SEC this year and why there was such a great separation, top to bottom, there was commitment in the NIL and investing in our student-athletes.

If you look at many conferences, the teams that finished at the top of their conferences -- let's just say Louisville and Duke, for example, in the ACC. Those two programs have been consistently well supported. They got great history. So when it comes to the NIL, they're going to be invested. Not everybody in the ACC invested like those two schools.

In the SEC the teams that finished at the bottom were almost as invested as the teams in the top, and as a result you have 16 teams that are really playing hard, that are really talented, that are really deep and well coached.

And then we went in the nonconference, and demonstrated that with our record and our record against pretty much every conference. Maybe the Big Ten we didn't have much of an advantage over. But other than that, we separated ourselves.

Q. Bruce, with how close you are to Alabama State, I'm from Nashville where there is a ton of colleges there, is there any meeting with each other, running ideas with each other, collaboration between the programs? That's a SWAC program, and you're obviously SEC, resources are a little different.

BRUCE PEARL: I would say this. First of all, Tony Madlock was an assistant at Auburn for four years, he was an assistant at Memphis. I think one of the things he has done, and many coaches have done this in the SWAC, coach at Texas Southern comes from LSU. Many of those coaches have been at the high major level. They had the same high major expectations for their student-athletes



that I have for mine, try to hold them to the same standards, try to develop the same level of staff.

They don't have the resources we have, but their expectations for how they train, how they coach, how they treat their players. Look at the schedule that Alabama State plays in a nonconference. They played Missouri and LSU out of our league this year. Last year they played USC. They played a number of high-major teams, Auburn. And so there is a level of familiarity.

I would say that the advantage that Alabama State would have in this sense is that they're not going to be intimidated by Auburn. They played against us. Their kids know our kids. They played against each other, some of them, in high school.

Whereas if we had played another team that really didn't know much about us, or whatever, from another part of the country, who were playing the No. 1 team seed -- don't worry about Alabama State. They ain't afraid of us.

Q. Coach, this team seems like they've been able to turn the page from game-to-game this year, especially the grueling part of the SEC, evenly the nonconference before. Is there something about this team that makes past years different? I know each team is different, I get that part but it seems like you've been able to hit the reset button every single night in conference play leading up to this?

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah, we absolutely grinded. And we did, we turned the page. We got ready to play. We were excited about playing every night. I think the difference between this year's team and others is this year's team I have never had a team that's been battle tested like this year's team with 16 Quad 1 wins. We have played 23 -- 23 of our 33 games are against teams that are in this tournament.

So we have found ways to win. We found a couple ways to lose, too, but mostly -- so I think we feel really prepared. We know that, again, we've played the top seeds. We beat Houston; they're a number 1 seed. We lost at Duke in a close game; they're a number 1 seed. We lost to Florida, who is playing as well as anybody in the country, who is a number 1 seed. So we've played all the number ones. We beat Alabama; they're a number 2. We beat Tennessee once; they're a number 2.

So we're good enough -- so we belong. Our goals might be higher, because of that. Like, I would like to win the South Region and get to the Final Four. That's what the number one seed should do. Is it going to be easy? No, Alabama State is not going to be easy, Louisville or

Creighton aren't going to be easy. The 4s and 5s and 2s and 3s in this region, aren't going to be easy. We recognize that. And we're good enough to accomplish it.

Q. Coach, as far as the connectivity on this team, it seems superior. How much more offense are you going to try to maybe push, you know, off rebounds and maybe off turnovers?

BRUCE PEARL: I think the connectivity has to do with the fact that these guys really care about each other, they like each other, they respect each other. They've made sacrifices for one another. At every position because -- let's say we're playing nine guys double-digit minutes. You've got to share the ball more, and I think we have all done a great job of -- we know our roles.

We know our strengths. We know our weaknesses, and the guys have played to them almost all year. The biggest thing that we've got to do is we've got to defend and rebound. Defense and rebounding every night, every possession will carry you through this tournament. You have to bring that. At the same time, my teams that have advanced in postseason play shot is pretty well, got hot. You think about that Final Four run, we made a bunch of threes against Kansas, North Carolina and Kentucky. We're going to have to do the same thing here if we're going to advance.

Q. Bruce, these two games that you lost to Tennessee and Alabama, strange things happen. You could have won almost as easily as you lost. Is this thing really much different right now than it was the last time y'all were here?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, I think this team is much better than last year's team. I mean --

Q. (No microphone.)

BRUCE PEARL: Since we left Lexington, three weeks ago, where we won the regular season championship, we've lost three out of our last four games, at Texas A&M who is a 4 seed, Alabama at home at the buzzer, who is a 2 seed, and then at Tennessee in the SEC Tournament in Nashville, in pretty close to a last-possession-type game. I think when you are playing team of that caliber, you've got to make shots, you gotta make free throws, you gotta make layups, you gotta do simple plays. We didn't do some of those things in those losses.

I don't think it affects our confidence. I think that we're -- we're prepared. But that stuff, even if we had won all those games, it doesn't mean anything. Doesn't mean anything tomorrow at 2:50. This team is prepared. This team is



confident.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we appreciate your time.
Thank you.

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