

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

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Rupp Arena

Auburn Tigers

Bruce Pearl

Chaney Johnson

Miles Kelly

Johni Broome

Media Conference

Auburn - 83, Alabama State - 63

THE MODERATOR: We are joined now by Auburn Head Coach Bruce Pearl and student-athletes Johni Broome, Miles Kelly, and Chaney Johnson.

We will kindly ask Coach for an opening statement, then direct all questions to student-athletes. When that's finished, they can be excused, and then we will return to questions for Coach.

Coach, if you would please, start us off with some comments.

BRUCE PEARL: Just congratulate Alabama State on a great season, a historic season for the Hornets. They represented their university in an outstanding way.

They were a formidable opponent. We didn't play our best, but I think they had a lot to do with it. So I just give them a great deal of credit.

Miles was terrific. Tahaad was terrific at times. Johni dominated on the inside when he had to, but trust me we can play -- and we'll need to play -- a lot better.

Again, we missed 14 free throws, we made 18, and that's going to catch us in a close game. These next games have a chance to be closer, so we've got to sharpen up in that area.

Part of that is valuing possessions, and if there's one thing



I can get my guys from this point forward to lock into right now, did we value every possession on the defensive end? Did we value any offensive end scoring through contact? Did we just rely on the whistle? And then would we finish plays?

That's the biggest difference right now between the way we were playing earlier in the season and the way we're playing right now. You can do that against a team that you're better than, but you can't do that -- we won't be able to do that from this point forward.

Q. For any of the three players, how much did you guys watch Alabama State's trap defense in that first opening game they played the other day?

JOHNI BROOME: We knew they were a very scrappy team. We knew they change their defense up a lot. They go man, they go 1-3-1, and they go 2-3. That's a good strategy. They try to make us take a lot of tough 2s. They double and triple the baseline and the post.

Shout out to them for having a game plan, but we have to play better.

Q. Johni, you set a program record for double-doubles this season with your game today. What does that mean to you? Obviously we talked about that before the season when you tied it, but now to pass it, what does that mean?

JOHNI BROOME: It means a lot to solidify my name in Auburn history and kind of give back to the university.

Q. Miles, you started the game on a heater 4 for 4 from 3. Can you talk about what it's like to get in a zone so early in your first NCAA Tournament game with Auburn?

MILES KELLY: It's everything I dreamed of. It's great. My teammates did a great job of finding me, and all I had to do was knock it down.

Just credit to my teammates for giving me open looks.

Q. Chaney, big bounceback game for you after a few in a row where you had been kind of statistically



... when all is said, we're done.®



limited. How did it feel? Anything different for you in this game? How did it feel to bounce back the way you did with your scoring and your rebounding?

CHANEY JOHNSON: All credit to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Without him, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have these opportunities that I have.

It's a great feeling coming off of bad shooting games just being there for my team, just doing everything I can, and just playing hard. That's all I can do, and that's all I will do. It's a great feeling. It's a blessing as well.

Q. Johni, you're spending time pretty close to where you started college at Morehead. Have you been able to talk to any friends from there?

JOHNI BROOME: Yeah, I had a couple friends from Morehead come to the game.

Q. Miles, the play late there in the first half where you hit that corner 3 off the scramble, just how big of a bucket was that and you all fighting for that rebound after Johni's and one that kind of gave you all lifts heading into halftime?

MILES KELLY: It was huge for us and for our energy. At that point in the game, our energy was kind of low. Alabama State just came off a run, so we needed to make plays in order to get back on our run.

I just seen the ball going, and I was close to the 3-point line, and I stepped back and made the shot.

Q. Miles, you seemed to take a more vocal role in this game when Alabama State went on the run, talking to the team about getting that energy up. Can you talk about what you said to your teammates in that moment.

MILES KELLY: This is win or go home time. So we've got to do whatever it takes to win. At that moment in the game, we needed some energy.

People we rely on throughout the team for energy, they weren't there, so I had to bring another level of energy to get us going.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead and excuse the student-athletes. More questions for Coach Pearl, please.

Q. Coach, you're back in the first round. Obviously you guys lost to Yale this year. Can you talk about what you talked about your team? Earlier in the season you said before Florida, you didn't do a good

job of letting them know what that game meant to Florida? What did you tell your team in this first round with Alabama State wanting to come in potentially with the upset that had nothing to lose?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, that Alabama State had already accomplished more than most of the guys on my team. Dylan Cardwell, Johni Broome, JP Pegues, and Chris Moore are the only guys on my team to win an NCAA Tournament game going into this game. Alabama State, that whole team had already won a game. That whole team had accomplished more than our team had accomplished.

Going back to Yale, we played better against Yale than we did tonight. Give Alabama State credit.

Q. Coach, with the big game that Miles had today, you talked about the energy, how big is that going down the stretch on Saturday and potentially moving forward having him like that?

BRUCE PEARL: I think what it does and what gets rewarded is Miles is one of the most consistent trainers, puts the time in, and is disciplined. So you love to see guys get rewarded who grind, do the right things, train the right way, unselfish.

And the thing I loved about Miles' shots, they were all shots within the framework of the offense. They were all shots coming off of screens. They were all shots where everybody in the building knew he was going to take that shot.

The one thing about Miles Kelly is you absolutely know what you're going to get. I think that's why Miles has got a chance to be one of the better pros that we have on this team because he's going to 3 and D at the next level, you can count on it.

That maturity, that taking care of business is a part of who he is, and I think the scouts see that clearly.

Q. You said you played better against Yale last year than you did in this game?

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah, we shot 50 percent, we had a great assist-to-turnover ratio, we missed some free throws in that game too, but we actually played better against Yale.

Q. Did that surprise you today considering all the talk and everything going into this tournament?

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah, I thought our effort and energy



could have been better. I thought Alabama State was able to beat us off the closeouts a little bit too much. I thought our bigs did a pretty good job of challenging shots at the rim. But we just weren't sharp.

Q. You've got to do something?

BRUCE PEARL: I think the other thing too, our teams always play with great effort and energy, or you have to or our system doesn't really work, and I just think we didn't tonight.

Q. Bruce, you're talking about the valuing the possessions on both ends. How long has that been? Has that been the three or four losses going into this, or has that going on for a bit here?

BRUCE PEARL: I would say it's been the last month or so, where I would say prior to that probably we were just a little sharper. Valuing a possession is making free throws. Valuing a possession is not having a careless turnover. Forced turnovers will happen.

Taking shots that we know -- that play wasn't designed for that look, and you know it, and your teammates know it, and yet you do it anyways.

So if we can get on the same page a little bit more, and like I said, value that possession, we've got a chance.

Creighton is still a very veteran team, that they've been through it. They're not going to beat themselves. We'll have a great game plan together, but it's going to be a very, very tough second round for us.

Q. Coach, can you talk about Tahaad Pettiford tonight? 0 for 8 in his last game, bounces back 5 for 9, 16 points, 5 rebounds, 5 assists. Can you talk about the true freshman in his first NCAA Tournament game?

BRUCE PEARL: It was great to see him bounce back, great to see him -- even after he missed his first couple shots, and you're like, oh, this is going to continue, he just obviously lit up.

The thing I liked about his game tonight, he was better defensively. He got 50-50 balls and rebounds. He used his speed and his quickness and his athleticism. Alabama State is a very quick, very athletic team, and Tahaad Pettiford is as quick as any of them out there. I thought his presence was a huge spark for us coming off the bench.

Both he and Chaney Johnson, if you look at Tahaad was plus 22, Chaney was plus 19. Those two guys played great for us coming off the bench.

Q. Given what you said about the lack of sharpness, how well Creighton plays, do you feel like you all played well enough tonight to beat Creighton if they play at the level they're going to play at potentially that you think?

BRUCE PEARL: I apologize. Could you ask that again?

Q. Given what you said about the lack of sharpness tonight maybe leading into this game and how well Creighton can play and that they won't beat themselves, do you feel like you all played well enough tonight to potentially beat a Creighton team that will be firing on all cylinders?

BRUCE PEARL: No, we won't beat Creighton playing the way we played tonight. We can play better. We know we can tighten things up. But that's the thing about the tournament, we will absolutely get to the next game.

One of the things that we'll do, even in a short period of time, we're going to look at today. We're going to look at it a little bit and go, okay, this is how we're going to be done on Saturday against a much better, much bigger, much different kind of a basketball team.

So hopefully we can learn. I'm very pleased with the win. At the end of the day on Saturday, there are going to be 32 teams left, and Auburn is still one of them.

Q. Bruce, you mentioned earlier 13 and 7 for Chaney, kind of how he's struggled here down the stretch. But what was it like for him and the team as a whole to get that lift today in the frontcourt?

BRUCE PEARL: I think Chaney is like one of those guys that like 13 and 7 for me is like nothing for Chaney. I think he's a 20, 10 guy. Even though he's not all the time, I just have that much confidence in him.

When he gets it, I think he's going to make a shot. When we get it inside, I think it's a bucket or a foul. Chaney is able to -- we did a lot of switching tonight. Chaney was terrific defensively, keeping guys in front.

Again, another guy that does it the right way, trains the right way. Loves the Lord. Puts the Lord first in everything he does. So Chaney Johnson can call God any time he wants to. They have a direct line. They have a direct connection.

Q. After the loss to Tennessee, Dylan Cardwell said his message to his teammates was we have to have a sense of urgency because, if we lose another game,



there's no more team meals, there's no more Auburn basketball. He wants to keep playing till April. Did you feel like that message set in? You said you felt they were lacking energy. Was the urgency there, though?

BRUCE PEARL: I think cap delivered the message. I think the message was great. His teammates understood it. Hopefully that message will be delivered again on Saturday.

Q. Bruce, you mentioned about getting in transition. It felt like you all were pushing the pace maybe a little bit more, especially off the defensive rebounds. How do you feel you guys did just speeding it up a little bit and trying to create some looks that way?

BRUCE PEARL: We've got a few easy ones. We could have done a better job attacking pressure. The 1-3-1 bothered us more than it should have. Again, this is Alabama State, they do a nice job of mixing things up. They make you think and make you do a lot of things you haven't had to do. Haven't played against a 1-3-1 in two months.

That's why Coach does a nice job. They're very versatile defensively.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

