

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

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Lexington, Kentucky, USA

Rupp Arena

**Auburn Tigers**

**Bruce Pearl**

**Tahaad Pettiford**

**Denver Jones**

**Johni Broome**

Media Conference

Auburn 82, Creighton 70

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Auburn Head Coach Bruce Pearl, Tahaad Pettiford, Denver Jones and Johni Broome. Questions for our student-athletes after Coach's opening statement.

BRUCE PEARL: I get asked a lot how this basketball program has become so competitive over the last eight years. Well, you're looking at the reasons right here. But for me, I believe it was God's plan to give us this success, success beyond what we deserve. To give us this platform. To give us an opportunity to start this conference briefly and remind the world that Edan Alexander is still held hostage in Gaza right now. An American held hostage and not enough people in this country know his name.

I asked the players if I started out this press conference and called out the name of an American, brings the hostages home.

Very proud of my team. We played Auburn basketball. We played like the number 1 team in the country. We acted like the number 1 team in the country. We prepared like the number 1 team in the country.

We talked a little bit about game one and not giving the kind of effort and energy that was required and, you know, not really trusting one another, sharing it, and the sacrifices that need to be made. Tonight we put all that behind us and the guys did a phenomenal job on both ends of the



floor.

My congratulations to Creighton on an incredible year. They have a wonderful coach. They've got some tremendous seniors, Steven Ashworth and the big fella. Just had great, great careers.

But this guy sitting right there in the middle, Denver Jones, I've been telling everybody he is one of the best defensive guards in all of college basketball and he proved it tonight with the effort and energy that he put forth and obviously making it really hard for their best player to get any kind of open looks, and this guy right here to my right is fearless. Seniors on this team trust him. So does his coach.

That guy down at the other end, you saw -- you continue to see night after night why he's the National College Player of the Year, in my opinion.

**Q. Denver, yesterday Creighton coach Greg McDermott said whoever guards their point guard is going to be tired. Are you tired?**

DENVER JONES: Not going to lie, I was pretty tired after the game. It was a lot of work chasing him around those screens.

**Q. But you got it done and slowed down their offense in the second half. Talk about that and how it got done.**

DENVER JONES: Honestly putting forth effort and energy. We talked about the type of team we were going to play and what we need to work on. And coming into this game you could feel in the air that today was a lot different than the other day.

We came out here and proved it second half especially.

**Q. Tahaad, another big game. You led Auburn in scoring today. Talk about what was working for you so well on the court today?**

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Just playing the offense. We knew the shots that we were going to get, just getting in the gym and working on those types of shots and being ready for the situation. My guys helped me get the ball, get me



open and helped me find the shots that I wanted to get.

**Q. Tahaad, I guess Chad Baker-Mazara was the table setter in that second half. When he went out with the hip injury, was that when you kinda thought I need to pick up the slack? I mean, everybody kinda picked up the slack on the bench for you guys.**

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Definitely losing a guy like Chad, he's playing so well, he's a big part of this team. Seeing him go down, everybody knew they had to step up and do what they had to do to get the win.

**Q. Denver, you came to Auburn mostly considered a scorer and now your coach says you're the best defensive guard in the country. I don't want to call it a transformation but talk about that journey and what it takes for you to say, I might not score as much but I'm going to help my team win this way?**

DENVER JONES: Honestly, that was the main reason why I came here. I came because I wanted to win and I knew the system. I knew the type of players that they were going to have here at Auburn.

Coming here obviously defense. The way we play defense is challenging already, just coming from another school but I wanted to be one of the best two-way guards in the league, and that was one of the main things I focused on, especially this off-season.

**Q. You guys were able to control the boards, only 4 offensive rebounds for them. How important was it to limit the second-chance opportunities for Creighton?**

JOHNI BROOME: It was very important. I think that was everybody being bought in to wanting to win. Obviously you have to contribute to be on the court. So if that's what we have to do to rebound the basketball while our guards are having great games, Denver, Tahaad, Miles, Chad, those guys, we have to rebound the basketball in order to impact the game.

**Q. Johni, it's not often that you don't hit double figures in scoring. Your teammates really stepped in to help fill that void. Talk about the trust that you had in them to carry the load offensively tonight.**

JOHNI BROOME: For sure, I didn't have a good offensive game. I shot 4 for 13 but that's okay. I came here to win. This season is about winning. I know my teammates got my back and they know I have theirs.

My shots weren't falling, so I just had to do whatever I can to impact winning and I let everybody else do the scoring.

**Q. Johni, what does it mean to have someone step up like Tahaad the last two games, 16 and 23 down the stretch to send you to the Sweet 16?**

JOHNI BROOME: He's a special freshman, you know? He understands the game. He's learned a lot from kind of the older guys and he knows when the time that we need him to step up. He steps up to the challenge, you know, a lot of the times for us. That's what you expect out of a guy like him.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks for your time, guys.

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Happy birthday, mom!

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

**Q. Bruce, I know the job is not done yet but we talked about getting to the second week. What does it mean to you to get to the Atlanta Regional?**

BRUCE PEARL: As I said yesterday, Thursday was the first NCAA win for a lot of our guys. We haven't been past the first weekend since 2019, when we got to the Final Four. Being the number 1 overall seed it would have been disappointing if we didn't do it again. We got upset by Miami as a number 2 seed a few years ago with Walker Kessler and Jabari Smith.

But we played a team in Creighton tonight that is as good as the teams we will see in Atlanta, whether it was Michigan or Texas A&M or I'm not sure who the other two are -- Michigan State, who does Michigan State play? New Mexico? Okay, but we knew Creighton was going to be as good as anybody we would see on the road to the Final Four. I feel that way. Hopefully this is something we could build on.

**Q. Coach, he got hurt early into the second half, but Chad Baker-Mazara scored 12 points in six and a half minutes to get you started. Talk about the effort that he gave you in the game that you won ultimately by 12 points.**

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah, Chad was being guarded by a freshman, Jackson McAndrew, who had a great, great offensive game but Chad had the advantage. We were able to get him in a ball screen action where he was able to turn corners and get downhill and score the basketball. I thought in the first half when we weren't shooting a very good percentage, the guys were going downhill and I don't want to say they were trying to draw fouls but we were winding up on the floor and the fouls weren't called and that was not good. I thought in the second half we stopped



that and we just went down there and tried to get buckets.

And Chad, you know, obviously he's a buck seventy-five soaking wet and he has a bony ass. So when he lands on the ground, bam, it's wood on bone. So he probably got a pretty good bruise. Hopefully that's all it is.

**Q. Bruce, especially Tahaad and Denver got downhill and got in the lane and scored, how important was that to take the ball to the basket?**

BRUCE PEARL: When you go up against drop coverage you're going to be able to get a ball screen and you're going to be able to turn corners. Creighton does a great job of funneling everyone to the rim, to the shot blocker. We tried to put a body on the shot blocker on the backside, so he couldn't rotate over. And when he did rotate over, those guys particularly, Tahaad, Chad, Denver had a big bucket late, were able to get in the lane and make buckets and then we had some backside rebounding there to take advantage of the shot blocking. So it was a very simple game plan.

Steven Pearl had the scout tonight and he had an absolutely masterful game plan. Particularly Steven was focused on the defensive end, just really, really good. I know it didn't look like it when they were banging all those threes but to hold a really good offensive team to 70 points and hold them, the shooting percentage of 42%, 23% from three was huge.

Then my offensive coordinator, Mike Burgomaster, we had a good feel for who depending upon where the big fella, who he was guarding and the actions we wanted to run to be able to open shots and get downhill.

**Q. Coach, how does having a core group of seniors give you an advantage in a win like this?**

BRUCE PEARL: I think it's always an advantage when you have older guys, but my older guys haven't been here before. Creighton's been to the Sweet 16 four out of last five years. Those guys on that team have been to the Sweet 16 for three or four of the last five years. I don't have anybody on our team. One of the best performers in the second half was a freshman.

So some of that experience thing, it's important, but it wasn't the factor tonight.

**Q. Bruce, what changed in the second half, keeping the point guard and McAndrew went off the first half y'all seemed to limit him second half, what do you do defensively to make sure the ball got out of their hands?**

BRUCE PEARL: We really worked harder at getting our bigs up to the level. In the first half our bigs were playing too far back from their men and were not able to get out there and impact those ball screens and keep Creighton on the perimeter.

I would say fatigue could have been a factor in the sense that the way we guard makes Creighton work really hard to get open and get looks. It does take its toll a little bit. I thought our physicality on the rebounding and physicality being bodies on bodies, I think they were a little fatigued in the second half.

**Q. Following up on that, what was the one thing that you saw in the first half that I guess in the absence of your shooting you were getting rebounds and stuff. Did you just tell them just go to the boards harder and good things will happen on the other end?**

BRUCE PEARL: The halftime talk was easy: Guys, they've banged nine threes, we've missed a couple of inside shots, we're shooting 30% and we're down a bucket, are you kidding me?

Creighton has got to go into the halftime thinking how are we only up by 2 points? We shot well, executed well, made nine threes, we should be up by double digits. But we made some offense out of our defense, and we were more dominant on the boards, particularly got some offensive rebounding baskets. We found a way to manufacture enough points to still be in the game.

I thought we were in great shape at halftime considering how well Creighton played and the margin was what it was.

**Q. Bruce, they wanted to know about the hostages, forgive me for not doing my homework on this. What made you say that and got you to? Do you have friends or is it anything that you --**

BRUCE PEARL: What made me say it is, again, it starts with my faith, and it starts with us answering the question, why has God blessed Auburn and this basketball team the way he has all season long. Honestly, it's I think to put us on a platform, in this case right now myself as a Jewish American who loves his country more than anything else in the world.

My grandfather came over here at 11 years old in 1929. He became a citizen when he was 32 years old, said it was the greatest day of his life. This Jewish American loves his country more than anything else. At the same time Israel that is our ancestral homeland and it's under attack. It's under siege. All it wants to do is live in peace with its



neighbors, and there are Arab countries that are wanting peace with Israel right now, but there is a segment of the population that is there in the Middle East doing nothing but attacking Israel for 85 years.

October 7th was the worst day since the Holocaust for the Jewish people, and they say they want to do it again and again and again. We have American held hostages in Gaza right now, and it's unacceptable. And President Trump called it out, and said if they just free the hostages, the killing would stop. Free the hostages, and the killing will stop, and that's up to Hamas.

**Q. Coach, this was the first game this season that Creighton lost when they shot better than 36%. They were 11-0 in shooting 36% or better from three. They shot 44% tonight. Talk about the efforts to try to run them off the three-point line and continuing to play Auburn basketball when they were shooting so well from the perimeter.**

BRUCE PEARL: I thought they banged some shots -- they got some 50/50 balls and some inside-out things. Two or three of them were not necessarily offensive sets, they got some stuff in transition, and we recognize that they're making 12 threes and they got their 17 assist average.

But obviously for us to be able to score 82 and shoot 60% in the second half, I thought we controlled the game in the second half with our offense. Again, played like we've been playing all year long, just sharing it. Coach Greg McDermott told me after the game he recognized we had a really, really good team and so do they. Our guys played up to their ability today, very proud of them.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

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