

# NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Norfolk State vs Florida

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Lenovo Center

## Florida Gators

## Todd Golden

### Media Conference



**you'd followed his journey prior to coming to Florida and what separates him, what makes him special.**

TODD GOLDEN: When we were fortunate enough to get the opportunity here at Florida, we kind of did a research project on all the young men from the state that were playing elsewhere to try to prepare for the transfer portal and try to just have a good understanding of who was out there.

So we were able to identify him. He obviously had a fantastic season at Iona as a sophomore and played for Coach Pitino, one of the best coaches in our profession. So when he became available, he was a guy we really, really wanted to add to our program because we felt like he would really raise the bar for us.

When we were able to secure his commitment and add him, obviously we haven't looked back. He's a big part as to why we've been so successful. He had a great year for us last year, playing alongside Zyon Pullin, but the strides and the growth that he's made this year, I can't say enough about him and the work he's put in to get there.

A lot of people questioned his ability to play point guard at the SEC level, and he, in my humble opinion, is playing like the best guard in America right now. He's as big a part of our success as anybody. His leadership has been fantastic. He's consistent. He works hard. He asks a lot out of his teammates, but he always delivers himself.

Walter Clayton is very, very, very impactful as to why we've been able to kind of raise the level of our program.

**Q. Todd, last year you guys had confidence, you were close, but this year there's almost an assurance about this team, and it's paid off. Where does that come from, the buy-in, what is it? Where's the giant leap from last year, year 2 to year 3?**

TODD GOLDEN: To that point, I thought we were close last year. We did a lot of good things. We were fantastic offensively we were explosive, averaged close to 90 a game. But we also had some areas of weakness.

Our defense specifically was a spot where we were really inconsistent, and we didn't play consistently enough at the

THE MODERATOR: We are now ready to begin Coach Golden's portion of the press conference.

Coach, could you please give us an opening statement.

TODD GOLDEN: Obviously really, really fortunate and happy to be here. Really proud of the season that our players have had to this point. 30 wins, winning the SEC Championship last week in the tournament, and earning the 1 seed is something we're really proud of, and we're hoping we're just getting started.

**Q. Smile, man. So the big 3 was just up here, the veteran guard guys, and there's more than for, but the main post players, how much of a separator are they from what most teams can bring to the table in terms of their effort and their depth?**

TODD GOLDEN: For a large part of the season, our perimeter received a lot of the credit, as they should for the level in which they played consistently. Denzel is in that group as well. Urby has come on and played very well.

As you said, I do think the separators are frontcourt. Reuben and Alex did a great job starting for us all year. Tommy, definitely an additional starter-level player, one of the best sixth man in the league, has played an all league level for a majority of the season. Being fortunate enough to add Micah back about a month ago was just an addition, that for lack of a better term, completed us. It gave us strength on the front line and allowed us to go nine deep.

As we won 12 out of the last 13, our frontcourt deserves a lot of credit for that. Coach Barnes talked about it after the SEC Championship game as being one of the most complete front lines in America, and I agree with that.

**Q. Just with regard to Walter, just curious how much**



level to be a very, very good team.

After last year, I think our staff did a good job of self-evaluating and understanding where we needed to improve and get better, both from a coaching perspective and a roster perspective. We went out, and the two main guys obviously that we added from the portal in Alijah and Reuben, have just added a level of toughness and physicality and really raised the bar for us on the defensive end.

We bet on our guys and our program making a jump, and those guys certainly have done that. Alex Condon, Tommy, Denzel, Will, and Walt, all five of them specifically have made a big leap this year and are much better than they were last year. The personality of our team is starting to show in terms of their unselfishness and their willingness to play for each other.

All of those things together have given this group a lot of confidence. Our players compete really hard, they're really talented, but they allow us to coach them and hold them accountable. Those are the main reasons why we've been so successful this year.

**Q. Todd, obviously you guys have big goals and aspirations, but for this first game, how much is it important for you and your team to get this win? For you as a coach and then for the group that went through last year.**

TODD GOLDEN: Obviously incredibly important because, if we don't, we're going home. This is kind of just the next step. Norfolk State honestly is a very good team. They're a very good team. I think they're incredibly well coached. They run good stuff offensively. They're unique defensively. They'll throw different defenses at you.

They're going to make us think tomorrow, which I think is a good strategy in this type of situation. But our guys will be prepared. From a program standpoint, we obviously made a big jump last week getting back to being able to raise a trophy at the SEC Tournament, and now we feel like taking this next step in the NCAA Tournament, obviously winning tomorrow will be the first step in our ability to make a deep run.

As you said, it starts tomorrow. We've got to have a great game tomorrow night.

**Q. You talked about near the end of the season, throughout the season, the underdog mentality that your team carries. How do you maintain that mentality while also seeing basically almost the entire national media still choose you guys as National Championship**

**favorites.**

TODD GOLDEN: It's changed a lot over the last 72 hours, I can promise you that. We went into Nashville still feeling like we had a lot to prove and that we maybe weren't getting the respect nationally that we deserved.

After three great games in three days there, it's flipped, and now we have a different challenge ahead of us, and that's handling success. Being in the eye of the media and having people talk about us. ESPN, their four media guys, all selected us to win the National Championship Sunday afternoon after we won the SEC Tournament.

The talk of our team has been we have to do everything we can to stay consistent, to stay humble, and not allow all the just excitement around our program take away from what's made us who we are this year, which is a tough team that plays with an edge.

I believe our guys are mature enough to handle that. Our staff understands what's in front of us. We're going to do everything we can to continue to play the way we have up to this point.

**Q. Todd, a lot of conversation this year about how physical the SEC was style of play-wise. How do you think that's going to translate to the tournament? Is there anything you're going to be looking for in the officiating to -- you know, if you need to make an adjustment there, that you can do that?**

TODD GOLDEN: I think it's a great question because our league is by far, in my opinion, the most physical league in America. At times I think clubs from our league struggle in the first game just kind of getting used to the way the game is officiated compared to the SEC.

It's something that we've talked about as a staff a lot, something that we've kind of addressed with our players. There might be some things in SEC play that you can get away with that might get whistled early on in the tournament before you start getting into more of those kind of bigger, physical matchups.

We're mindful of it. We'll continue to address it with our guys, and we'll do everything we can to make sure that doesn't set us back when we're playing in big time foul trouble tomorrow night against Norfolk.

**Q. Todd, I know you guys have flushed this at this point, but what was the plane ride home and being able to kind of celebrate that with your team, walk off the plane with that trophy, and just kind of have that 24 hours to celebrate?**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

TODD GOLDEN: It was amazing. Winning the SEC Tournament this year especially is an incredible honor. The SEC was the best basketball league college has seen in the last 20 years analytically, and it's something I wanted our guys to enjoy and celebrate and be incredibly proud of.

We made a decision before we left for Nashville that, if we were somehow able to become victorious, that we were going to get right back on the plane and head out of there because we stayed and watched the selection show last year, we didn't get home until like 2:00 in the morning. We wanted to get back and kind of get off our feet.

Sure enough, the timing was, we took off like five minutes before the selection show started. We didn't really know what was going on. We were fortunate enough to have great pilots who were communicating with air traffic control or whatever, and we were able to get our matchup and the 8-9 matchup, and we were able to talk to our guys about it on the plane.

It was just really fun and really unique, and everybody enjoyed it. Yeah, it was something that we still are incredibly proud of, but we've moved on for the time being.

When we met back up Monday afternoon, our guys and our staff kind of made sure our mentality was good in terms of looking ahead and making sure we're ready for tomorrow.

**Q. What do you get out of these shoot-arounds today?**

TODD GOLDEN: We'll get up and down a little bit. Not playing 5-on-5, but trying to get up a little bit of a sweat. We did a walk-through off-site this morning, so we took care of the technical stuff and kind of the game plan stuff more already.

So we'll just kind of enjoy it and just get a lot of shots up and try to make sure our guys are comfortable and confident playing in this venue. Sometimes teams struggle shooting the ball in the first round of the tournament, going somewhere they haven't been before. Like I said, we'll dribble a little bit, we'll try to fly around, get up and down, try to get a little bit of a sweat. Do what we call big-little where we have our guards workout on one side and our bigs workout on the other. And then we'll go do some station work and try to take advantage of the 40.

We'll try to get a good sweat, get a lot of shots up, and after that we'll be pretty much done for the day.

**Q. Is there a balance between just getting your guys to enjoy this experience too, being in the spotlight and**

**families around and all that?**

TODD GOLDEN: It's a healthy balance because these opportunities aren't promised. We certainly don't take for granted the opportunity to come play in the NCAA Tournament. Again, we hope to be here for a while and play multiple games.

These are memories that these guys will have for a lifetime, and especially some of the types of young men that we have in our program. We have guys from Serbia, guys from Slovenia, guys from Lithuania, that just -- they don't really understand what the NCAA Tournament is until they get to America, and now they're here, and they're seeing it.

They're seeing a police escort taking our bus here to the arena, and it's just something that they'll be able to hold onto for the rest of their lives. So I want them to enjoy it.

Again, the unique thing about our team is I think we're very mature and we can do both. We can enjoy it, but still have the workmanlike attitude and approach to make sure we have a good performance tomorrow night. We'll go out there, when we get our 40 minutes on the floor, we'll be enjoying it out there too, I promise you that.

**Q. You talk about betting on your guys and expecting them to develop into better players, and it paid off. But continuity is not something we see often in this version of college basketball. What was it that made you want to bet on your team? You used the transfer portal, but not a complete swap over after a year.**

TODD GOLDEN: I think Florida's a unique job, in the sense of it being such a great place, that you can't sub a program. You can still build from the ground up. Obviously the transfer portal is going to be a big part of what we do. It has been at San Francisco, before I got here, and ever since I've been at Florida.

But now we're at the point in our program where my goal will be to continue to grow from the young guys in our program, like Isaiah Brown is a great example of that right now, a guy that doesn't play a lot for us, but I think can be a great player in the SEC in due time.

We want to give those guys the opportunity and show the same loyalty to them that they showed to us sticking around. Denzel Aberdeen is a great example of that, a guy that could have easily went in the portal after last year. He would have gotten promises going elsewhere, but he stuck it out because he loves Florida and he loves being a Gator.

He's being rewarded by obviously coming off the bench but



being an integral part of a great team, scoring the clinching basket against Tennessee on an incredible baseline drive last week, hitting a huge 3 before halftime that allowed us to separate to 9 points.

That loyalty, that togetherness is what makes us who we are. I think we have really, really good talent, good individual talent in our program, but we have great team talent. Our guys really enjoy playing together. They care about each other. There are real relationships in that locker room.

I feel like you can see that when you watch our team play.

**Q. Todd, how do you feel about John getting the head coaching job and what he's been able to do for you guys, and also how huge it is that he's going to stay through the tournament?**

TODD GOLDEN: I'm incredibly happy for John. My first coaching job was at Columbia University as Director of Basketball Ops in 2010, and John was the student manager for us when I was there. That staff, by the way, I think has five head coaches now, and we were not that good, which makes it even better.

John's an incredible young coach. He's done a great job this year. I've given him a lot more responsibility on the defensive side of the ball, and he's coordinated it very well.

Obviously our players deserve most of the credit for the jump we've made, but I think his organization and his leadership on that side have held us more accountable that way.

For me, I'm incredibly proud. I know my mentor Kyle Smith is incredibly proud that people are appreciating what, for lack of a better term, our tree has been able to do in college. When you see a guy like John get an opportunity at a great place like Campbell to come in and take over the job and see what he's able to do with his imprint on the program, he knows he has my full support, and myself and Kyle will be there for him whatever he needs.

You want your coaches to be able to get opportunities like that. Just like you want your players to grow and become NBA players, you want your staff to grow and become head coaches. It's going to be really difficult losing him, but at the same time, when you're able to have coaches in your program move on to head jobs, there's a lot of really talented people that want to come work for you also.

We'll have to look around and see who's the right fit. We have really good guys in our program like Jonathan Safir, who I'll likely promote to an assistant to take John's spot.

We'll continue to add bright young guys that are all about our program moving forward.

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