

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

Friday, March 21, 2025

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Lenovo Center

Florida Gators

Todd Golden

Walter Clayton Jr.

Alijah Martin

Media Conference

Florida - 95, Norfolk State - 69

THE MODERATOR: Good evening. We're now ready to start the Florida press conference. I'd like to remind you once again to please check your cell phones, make sure you're on mute.

Coach Golden, could you please start with an opening statement.

TODD GOLDEN: Great win for us. Really proud of the way we played for the first 15 minutes of the game. I thought we played exceptionally well in all three facets, offensively, defensively, and on the glass.

Credit Norfolk. Obviously we got out to a big lead. I thought they did a great job competing. They were able to get downhill on us a little bit, did a great job getting into the paint, finishing over our bigs, and they were able to play us pretty well during the second half.

Overall, a great win for us and excited to see who we're going to play on Sunday.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Did you come out looking to set the tone? I mean, your first shot was pretty balling.

WALTER CLAYTON JR: For sure. That was everybody, when you say come out and set the tone. Like Coach said, those first minutes everybody was locked in. We were kind of doing what we was doing all year, so definitely.



Q. Walter, after last year losing in the first round, how important was it to get this first win, and how relieved are you that you did it?

WALTER CLAYTON JR: I think it's important to get every win at this point in the season. We lose, we go home. I think every win is important, and definitely glad we got this one out of the way so we can see who we're playing after tonight and focus on the next one.

Q. Alijah, Coach mentioned first 15 minutes of the game, what do you think changed? Was it something that they did to adjust to what you guys did? What did you think of the intensity for the final 25 minutes for you guys?

ALIJAH MARTIN: I think we got complacent. We kept looking at the scoreboard, and when you do that and you see you're up 20, you think like you could take a play off. We can't do that at this level. We can't give no team no hope. Just got to be better going forward.

Q. What was the message at halftime, and how did you guys want to regroup after they went on that run to close out the half?

ALIJAH MARTIN: Yeah, they went on an 11-0 run, so we were pretty pissed or whatever. But we know we just have to tighten up. We had some lazy plays, some careless plays, some uncharacteristic plays, and stuff like that. So we just had to get after it coming out.

Q. Alijah, you've kind of been here before. You've won in the tournament and advanced and all that type of stuff. Being so condensed, win or go home, what's your kind of message to the team, and how are you leading these guys here moving forward?

ALIJAH MARTIN: Just staying humble, just keep telling everybody remember where you come from because this team is full of underdogs. We haven't had so much success, and we can get the big head. Just have to keep reminding everybody to stay humble, not to take anybody lightly, and just enjoy every moment of it.

Q. Walter, 2,000 career points. What's that mean to



you and just kind of your journey to this point.

WALTER CLAYTON JR: Blessed. I think I'm blessed just to be on multiple teams where -- with a bunch of guys that just love each other, a bunch of guys that trust me to shoot the ball.

Honestly, I just thank all my teammates for instilling trust in me and even my coaches, without all their trust, I wouldn't be able to score any points. I appreciate all of them.

Q. For either player, obviously defense was up-and-down, but you guys held the 3-point line really well. How much of an emphasis was that going into the game and the ability to kind of shut them down from 3 and keep them from going on any big runs?

WALTER CLAYTON JR: We know they was a team that kind of didn't shoot many three-points, so I think we was kind of worried about those 3s for sure, allowing them to get to the shots they actually wanted. Yeah, that was definitely an emphasis for us, but we've got to be better and just contain the penetration as a team.

Q. How do either of you guys, whichever one, think Rueben came out early and set the tone? He had like five rebounds in like two minutes, I think, or something.

ALIJAH MARTIN: That's Rueben Chinyelu. That's him, being a force down low, and controlling the glass. But he's a big part of why we're having so much success, and I just want to give him his flowers.

THE MODERATOR: That's all the time we have for the student-athletes. Gentlemen, congratulations and thank you.

At this time, we'll go ahead and open up the floor for questions for Coach Golden.

Q. You heard Alijah say they maybe looked at the scoreboard a little too much at the end of the first half. A, is that a concern to you? And maybe, B, is it in some ways, when you're up 32 that early, are you almost glad they were challenged for a little longer in the game than that?

TODD GOLDEN: I'm not necessarily concerned moving forward that it's going to be an issue for us. I think we played exceptionally well for the first 15 minutes and kind of exhaled. Norfolk's good. They're quick. They're really hard to keep in front, and I thought our defensive intensity for the first 15 minutes of the game was elite. We did a great job of staying in front, guarding with physicality.

Then when we took a little bit of a breath, we actually had some bad turnovers that led to transition run-outs that gave them a little juice, a little confidence. And they're very well coached. Coach Jones does a great job continuing to motivate and keeping them engaged in the game. They got a little life. They had an 11-0 run, and I thought they did a good job of taking advantage of that.

I'm not necessarily concerned moving forward, but at the same time, no, I did not want the challenge. I would have preferred to continue to keep our foot on the gas and not give them any life.

Again, you can't necessarily dictate everything for 40 minutes, and Norfolk is a really prideful group, and they play incredibly hard. And as I said, they're very quick, and they're hard to keep in front.

Q. Todd, can you speak to your first NCAA Tournament victory as a coach.

TODD GOLDEN: Just excited, very happy, and hopefully this is the first of many over the next few years. This team has been great for us all year and put us in a position where we could be a 1 seed and have a game like this where we're heavily favored and had a very good opportunity to win a ballgame.

I'm grateful for my players and my staff for that.

Q. Todd, what did you think about the rebounding battle tonight? You guys seemed to dominate the glass for most of the night, but I think the first five or whatever of the second half, they really had some success.

TODD GOLDEN: I thought we were fantastic on the offensive glass, about as good as you could be. We got 66 percent of our misses back, which is an outrageous number.

But I thought on the defensive glass we were not very good. I thought we coasted a little bit. I didn't think we were very physical on the defensive glass. I thought we were trying to win 50-50 jumping battles as opposed to putting bodies on guys and blocking them off and keeping them away from the rim.

Again, that was something I thought we just relaxed a little bit once we got out to that big lead, and it's something we've got to correct and be better Sunday regardless of who we play.

Q. Todd, let's just talk about the ball movement

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tonight, 29 assists and 29 made shots, that's really good ball movement.

TODD GOLDEN: We're elite that way. Our team is really unselfish. We do a great job of sharing the ball. A big part of our scout was to make the simple play.

Norfolk, the way they guard, they really do a good job of keeping you out of the paint and helping off that next player, so there's not a lot of opportunities to drive the gaps.

It's like one dribble and move it to the next guy.

We do a very good job that way. That's kind of who we are. It's in our DNA, and it's why we've been a very good offensive team all year.

Our guys share it well. I thought we were a little sloppy in the second half with the ball. We had 10 turnovers in the last 24 minutes of that game, and we've just got to improve that. Overall, the way we shared and our unselfishness is really good.

Q. Todd, you guys are out here talking about ways you can improve after a 26-point win. How much does that reflect the maturity and expectations of this team? Alijah winning the game, I think, with two minutes left when they were on that run in the first half, how much are you leaning on him to help set the tone and talk to guys when the mentality slouches a little bit?

TODD GOLDEN: It's what our program is. We're not necessarily worried about results, we're more worried about process, and our process was not nearly as good after the first 15 minutes of the game.

Regardless of the final score, we just weren't as sharp as we expect to be, and what we feel like we need to be if we want to make a run in this tournament.

Alijah, really all three of our seniors, Alijah obviously has the experience of going deep, but Walt's a fantastic player, Will's a fantastic player, and they know, they understand what the standard is. All three of those guys are expected to raise the bar and hold their teammates accountable that way.

There were possessions where Will and Walt were not their best defensively tonight. We need them to be better on Sunday.

Collectively, I think our guys understand we just didn't execute as well as we needed to tonight that way.

Q. Todd, I thought on your bench play tonight and how fresh do you feel kind of going into Sunday in terms of what you got out of them and how you balance your minutes tonight?

TODD GOLDEN: We haven't played since last Sunday. So I think we're pretty fresh anyways, but it was good to be able to limit everybody. It looks like we were able to limit everybody to under 28 minutes.

So getting back quickly on the floor on Sunday, we should be good that way. I thought our bench, Micah was great again, just dominating the glass. Created so many second chance opportunities for us, does a great job keeping us in our offense, three assists. His turnover was kind of flukey late.

Tommy, I thought, played with great energy. He took good shots, didn't shoot it well from the perimeter, but did what he does, making winning plays for us and zero turnovers.

I thought Urby was pretty tight. I expected him to play better. I thought Zelly was pretty good. Waiting for Zay to get in there and get a dunk late.

Q. Walt probably had 100 foot of threes in the first half. What did you think of his bold play and how that kind of set the tone? Really just after getting the All-American notice, he kind of came out and made a statement pretty quickly.

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, he's obviously playing at an incredibly high level right now. He is a threat to score any time he has the ball in his hands. Regardless of where he is in the frontcourt, 30-foot shots for him are what most toeing the lines 3s are for most guys. They're great shots for us, and they have a very high percentage chance to go in.

When you're getting 66 percent of your misses back, it's a really great analytical shot for us. He's just playing at such a high level, but he's been doing this all year. You know. You watch our team all the time. You're at all of our games.

I'm very proud and happy for him that he got the notoriety he deserves, being an AP first team All-American and kind of sweeping those first team All-American honors. He'll continue to lead us, and we'll go as far as he and the perimeter goes and as hard as our frontcourt plays the rest of the year.

THE MODERATOR: I'm afraid that's all the time we have, Coach. Congratulations and thank you very much.

