

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - UConn vs Florida

Sunday, March 23, 2025

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Lenovo Center

Florida Gators

Todd Golden

Walter Clayton Jr.

Will Richard

Media Conference

Florida - 77, UConn - 75

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon. We are now ready to get started with the Florida press conference.

We'd like to start with an opening statement from Coach Golden.

TODD GOLDEN: This is a great win for our program. The time was now for us to take that next step. Again, Florida basketball back where it belongs. Being in the Sweet 16 is a great step in the right direction.

Incredibly proud of our players, especially, I should say, these two guys next to me, but the whole roster as well. We made winning play after winning play down the stretch in the last six minutes.

After about 34 minutes of it not looking like it was going to go our way.

That's the benefit of having three great senior leaders in the backcourt and some young hungry frontcourt players that will give their all to compete on every single play.

It wasn't necessarily pretty for a majority of the game for us, but that 8-0 run down the stretch, I think it finished with about 40 seconds, if this stat sheet is right, was huge. Our players delivered today.

THE MODERATOR: At this time, we'll open up questions for student-athletes.

Q. Walter, can you speak to kind of sticking with it



throughout the game and making the shots down the stretch and what you saw in those opportunities, the two 3s in the final two minutes.

WALTER CLAYTON JR: At the end, my teammate was trusting me with the ball in my hand to be able to shoot that shot, so I appreciate them for that trust and just sticking with it.

We knew this game wasn't going to be easy. They've got a championship pedigree, back-to-back champions. That's a great team. They had that experience. We knew it wasn't going to be easy. We kept our composure. This guy especially, he kept us together through the adversity.

Q. Walter, can you explain what either was up with your game or what they were doing to you that didn't allow you to play at the level you customarily do and then what you did do down the stretch?

WALTER CLAYTON JR: I knew they were kind of denying me a little bit, but I done see that before. I think it was kind more of a me thing.

My teammates did a great job throughout the game, kind of picking up where I was slacking.

Q. Late in the game when you went on this stretch, what's the mindset like when you decide, okay, we need to take these shots, we need to take this game over, what goes into your mindset for that?

WALTER CLAYTON JR: Nothing honestly. Been doing it all year. My teammates, like I said, they give me the ball and put trust in me to be able to shoot those shots.

Mindset don't really change, just got a couple up at the end of the game today.

Q. To either of the players, what does a game like this where Coach said it was kind of ugly and it was tough against a good opponent, that really tested you, what does a game like this do for you moving forward as you play tougher competition?

WILL RICHARD: UConn's a great program. A game like that definitely lets you know that you're ready to take that



next step. Like Coach said, as a program and as a team.

It definitely just helps us be better prepared for the next game and stuff like that, just facing adversity throughout the game and being resilient, things like that.

Q. For both the players, were there nervous moments today, and how do you kind of compartmentalize that and stay the course? What do you kind of lean into there?

WILL RICHARD: I wouldn't say nervous moments, but it was moments where we knew we had to lock in and give a little extra because they were on that run and stuff like that, and you've got to make plays to stop that.

For us, we just got back to what we were doing. We have trust in each other, the three senior guards, we have a lot of experience, and we did a great job trying to keep everybody calm throughout those moments.

THE MODERATOR: Walter, do you have anything to add?

WALTER CLAYTON JR: I do not.

Q. For both Walter and Will, talk about the defense, how you guys picked up the defensive intensity in those last five minutes. You all went from playing really good defense to just outstanding defense.

WALTER CLAYTON JR: It took us a little minute, kind of do what we wanted to do. I think they got some open shots early, and it kind of put us in a little bit of a spiral as players. We was all just trying to help each other out a little bit too much instead of sticking to our assignments. Down the stretch we ended up getting it figured out. We communicated better towards the end of the game, and we were able to get some stops.

THE MODERATOR: Will, could you add something?

WILL RICHARD: I do not.

Q. You guys missed 12 free throws in the second half alone in basically a one or two-possession game. Then on the misses, Tommy made the tip-out, maybe you had a tip-out. Can you take us through the sequence right there, the pressure of missing the free throws and then what happened after that.

THE MODERATOR: Will, could you answer that.

WILL RICHARD: Yeah, that's just us wanting to win. To win games like that, you've got to make big plays. We had multiple guys step up. Everybody that was on the court

impacted the game and helped us win the game. I would say it just comes down to wanting to win.

Q. What did Alijah show in the first half? It seemed like he was the one guy, man, he just had the right mentality, and he's been like here before. What did he kind of show you guys with that?

WALTER CLAYTON JR: I think he showed experience. Obviously he has been here before. Man, that's just Alijah. We see Alijah every day. We done seen him in multiple games this year, even at home, in the Georgia game when he came out. He's had multiple moments like that all year, and he just did that again today.

Q. This is the first time since 2017 that a Florida team's going to the Sweet 16. What does it mean to get the program back to that standard?

WILL RICHARD: It means a lot. This is why everybody came here. We wanted to bring Florida back to that national stage and that relevance.

For us, it means a lot, just playing for that logo and for the guys that came before us to help us get here.

THE MODERATOR: I'm afraid that's all the time we have for the student-athletes. Gentlemen, you're excused. Congratulations. Good luck in San Francisco.

We'll now open it up for Coach.

Q. I'm going to ask a sort of similar question. What was different about Walter for the first 30 or so minutes that we haven't seen much of him like that? Then what do you think changed the last eight to ten minutes that he played like an All-American?

TODD GOLDEN: Obviously they were bothering him just with some pressure. I think what he said had some merit in the sense that he was making some uncharacteristic mistakes, some turnovers that we haven't seen for a majority of the year, not as strong with the ball as he usually plays with.

But what makes Walter so special, just is his ability to stay even keeled regardless of how he's doing, whether it's great or not so great. His ability to continue to lock in and stay the course. Obviously over the last eight minutes I thought he did a great job of just kind of taking what the defense gave him, stepping up. His confidence level never wavers regardless of what's going on and hitting huge shots that allowed us to capitalize and win the game.

Q. A lot of people are talking about this kind of roster

construction and the format of this team and everything. As you were going through the process of putting these pieces together and everything, what were some big things that you were kind of looking for in these players to kind of put this roster together?

TODD GOLDEN: Backcourt players that can obviously play to the ball screen, good catch-and-shoot guys, good decision-makers in the frontcourt, guys that you can throw the ball to and let them make some good decisions out of DHO games and understand how the defense is playing and try to take advantage of it.

Our frontcourt is really, really good with the ball in their hands, making reads, making decisions. We're fortunate enough to really have five guys. Sam was a little banged up and he's coming back, and he was able to do that for us most of the year.

But all five of those guys are capable of catching the ball in the middle of the floor and making a decent read and a decent decision.

Our frontcourt is long, they're athletic. They all do a good job. They all play with high motors. All of our guys are really intelligent men who really understand how to play the game.

Q. You spoke yesterday about your expectation and what you were going to get from UConn, them leaning on their championship pedigree. How did their performance either meet or exceed your expectations for what you saw out there today?

TODD GOLDEN: I thought it met what we expected. A team that maybe wasn't at the same level as they had been for the last two years but came into March Madness expecting to win games.

As we said, they had multiple guys. I think Karaban is an incredible winner, a guy that's won so many games in college. They had a couple of those guys out there. Diarra has won a lot for them. Guys that are used to winning at this time.

As we said, they had won 13 games in a row, and they played like it. We got off to a good start. It didn't bother them that much. I thought they played really composed. They ran a really good offense. They bothered us a lot that way all the game.

But credit to our players because when it was kind of nut-cutting time, they stepped up and made big plays. I think it was more about our guys stepping up and winning the game than UConn not pushing through. Our guys

made big-time winning plays down the stretch.

Q. It looked like at the end of the game Dan and you had an embrace, and it was longer than usual. Can you share anything he said? It almost felt like a passing of the torch in that respect where maybe he's wishing you the best. I'm just curious what you guys talked about.

TODD GOLDEN: Coach Hurley and I have great respect for each other. Obviously he sees me as kind of an up-and-coming coach and probably sees a lot of himself in me in terms of being a fiery competitor and someone who runs a great program and does it the right way.

He was very gracious and very respectful and gave a great message of, hey, congratulations. I'm pulling for you guys. Let me know if you need anything moving forward.

But it meant a lot. The way that he handled the ending of the game with such graciousness, such grace, I should say, I probably appreciate it.

Q. You and Coach Hurley have contrasted styles in the way you react during the game.

TODD GOLDEN: Sometimes.

Q. What was kind of going through your mind as it went? You obviously have a lot of trust in these guys, but when it was getting kind of a little shaky at times, what was kind of your message, I guess?

TODD GOLDEN: Just to stay the course. We were -- a lot of it had to do with UConn, but we were doing some uncharacteristic things that we simply haven't done for a long time. We were loose with the ball in the first half. We didn't rebound great. Those are kind of the hallmarks of our program that make us consistent and raise our floor.

Again, I thought UConn did a good job bothering us that way. Second half, we got off to a decent start and then they pull away. I think it got up to seven and six, I guess. That was their biggest lead.

They kept it for -- and we couldn't seem to push through and get on top of them. We were down by two to three at the under 4 media. It's now or never, man, if we can't find a way to pull back out in front these next few minutes, then we're going home.

We just had some guys step up and making some huge winning plays down the stretch. Obviously what Walter did out of the ball screen hitting the 3. But the free throw and offensive rebounds, I think Alijah poked one out to Tommy

and Tommy poked one to Alijah where he got that dunk. Those are the two big winning plays, when we go back and break down the film, we'll say, all right, these are the two instances that kind of allowed us to steal that victory.

Q. Todd, after the Norfolk game you said, I'd rather have not been challenged so much and have your foot on the gas. I wonder, as you talk about taking that next step today, did the way you were challenged by UConn, doing it against them, was this sort of a meaningful, not just the win, but the way that the win happened meaningful in building that championship pedigree you're trying to create here?

TODD GOLDEN: I hope so. We stepped up and won a big game when it wasn't necessarily going our way. Our guys have been pretty mentally tough all year. They've done a good job of staying the course and kind of staying levelheaded.

We all know the reality, if you're going to make a deep run in March, you've got to catch some breaks, and you've got to win some games like this to be able to push through and stay alive.

Theoretically, beating a team like UConn, that's used to winning this time of year, in the fashion that we did should be really good for us moving forward.

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

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