

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Michigan vs Auburn

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Atlanta, Georgia, USA

State Farm Arena

Auburn Tigers

Bruce Pearl

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



Q. I'm not sure if you've heard or seen, but former Coach Chuck Person is supposed to be at your game this weekend. Has that been a motivator or a distraction for your team at all? Have you paid attention to that?

BRUCE PEARL: I haven't really paid attention to it. I know Chuck's in Atlanta, so I'm sure like all of our other former great Auburn Tigers, Chuck's excited about his team being in the Sweet 16.

Q. I was going to ask you about playing and also portaling right now. We've heard a lot of coaches just talk about the difficulty in that right now. How are you sort of balancing trying to win a National Championship and rebuild a roster for next year?

BRUCE PEARL: I loved Tom Izzo's response. I loved it. It was authentic. It was real. He is laser focused right now on trying to give his team the best chance they possibly can to advance to the Final Four. I get it completely.

I'm not spending any time on it. I'm focused on, like Coach said, what we're doing. I've made a couple calls, but not many, just to reach out. We've got a big staff, so our guys are just letting the potential prospects know that we've got work to do. Hopefully we're working for a couple weeks. But when our season is over, we'll begin to put that roster together next year.

I think the only other thing I would say about it is this. I was also on the NAB committee for trying to figure out when the best time to open the portal. I'm glad that the portal has gone from 45 days to 30 days because I think 30 days is enough time for those guys to decide whether they want to stay or whether they want to go.

I think the reason for the timing of doing it just after the Sweet 16 is almost all the teams in the country except 16 teams the season's over. So if you're a student-athlete and you're at another Division I institution and your season was over at the beginning of March, you're supposed to have to wait three or four weeks until the Final Four's over before you can move on with the rest of your life?

So I think the National Association of Basketball coaches kind of looked at, hey, what might be best for all the student-athletes when they decided to kind of do it at this window. Yeah, it's a little inconvenient for 16 teams, but these other student-athletes need to be able to figure out what's going on for the rest of their lives.

And just so you know, I'm also not a big fan of this transfer every year. We're teaching the kids to flee, not fight. I think the one-time transfer is great. I think the grad transfer is great. I always had guys transfer and came in, and in that year where they were not eligible to play, they got caught up academically, they got caught up physically, and they were so much more valuable after spending a year on campus understanding the system, and it would be like bringing back another veteran.

I don't make the rules, but I got to play by them.

Q. Bruce, you've obviously coached a lot of basketball, seen a lot of teams. How many 7-footers together have you seen like this in this Michigan lineup? And how many times have you seen two big men run the offense the way that they do a lot of times at Michigan?

BRUCE PEARL: I haven't seen this since I watched McHale and Parish, right? These two guys are special. Goldin, in the Big Ten he was the best player on the floor almost every single night.

And Wolf, there's not another 7-footer in college basketball that resembles him. He's got Larry Bird type ball handling, passing, feel. He's just a gifted, gifted player. Obviously they work beautifully together.

They're going up against Dylan Cardwell and Johni Broome and Chaney Johnson, those three guys are going

to be the focus of our defensive attack. Our ability to defend those two guys as well as No. 42 comes off the bench and shoots it a little bit for them, is going to be really the difference in the outcome.

Q. Coach, I wanted to ask you kind of a two-parter. One, couldn't help but notice the bracket. There's some teams you faced in the past at Tennessee that ended a few seasons. Kind of trivially, it's a little bit trivial, but take note of that. Then getting back to Izzo, asking about adjusting to the game, when you're talking about a 70-year-old coach who's done this long a time, do you see a lot of differences? In truth, what are the adjustments outside of NIL, transfer portal that we've seen over the last 10, 15 years?

BRUCE PEARL: In all fairness, and for full public disclosure, Mike covered me at Tennessee when I was a coach there. So he remembered us losing the last game of the season to go to the Final Four to Michigan State. He remembered me losing my last game as coach at Tennessee to Michigan in a first round game.

So when Mike may have saw that bracket, it may have been the first thing that came to his mind. It was not the first thing that came to my mind. Alabama State came to my mind. Creighton or Louisville came to my mind. This weekend we've got a four-team tournament against Michigan, Michigan State, and Ole Miss.

Michigan is as good as anybody in this field. They are. And I told our guys, I felt like Creighton could be in this group very easily. They made 4 out of the last 5 Sweet 16s, and I told our guys, if we can beat Creighton, when we get to Atlanta, there's not going to be anything there that's going to be beyond overwhelm us, or maybe even the Final Four.

If we're good enough to beat Creighton, if we're good enough to beat Michigan.

And of course, the survive and advance thing, I think that's really true for the first and second round for a 1 seed. It is about survive and advance for the top seeds. You get to this point, we feel like we're playing for a National Championship now, and we have four times we're going to have to do it. That's how I feel. I'm just telling you how I feel.

You don't feel like you're playing for the National Championship in the first and second round.

I love Coach Izzo because of his authenticity. I love him because he's so 100 percent real. And I love him because he speaks for the coaches. He represents us extremely

well. But at the same time, nobody loves their student-athletes more than Tom Izzo.

So he gets the idea that we're finally able to compensate our student-athletes and we're finally getting caught up in a system that was just delayed in recognizing the value of our student-athletes.

At the same time, I think what happened in the questioning, somebody was asking him about where he was in the portal, like he was going to be worried about it. I'm not worried about it right now. Neither is he. It's not taking any time away from him.

The adjustments, we still have guys at Auburn that have been here four to five years. Dylan Cardwell, five years. Chris Moore, five years. Last year Jaylin Williams was five years. We still do it the old fashioned way. At the same time, we have added some tremendous pieces through the transfer portal.

Most of our transfer portal guys were guys from junior college, Division II, Mid-major. I'm so proud of a guy like Johni Broome, who comes from a very mid-major background, Denver Jones, Chad Baker-Mazara, Chaney Johnson, all those guys. They speak to the American dream, the story. It doesn't matter where you start. It's all about where you finish.

So changing in the profession, you've just got to adjust with the rule changes.

Q. I'm just curious, you talked about keeping a strong presence in Atlanta, recruiting, all that kind of stuff. What would a couple tournament wins -- I know you play here annually, but what would a couple tournament wins do for maybe boosting that Atlanta strength a little bit?

BRUCE PEARL: It's great to be in Atlanta, and it's great to point out the quality of Atlanta basketball, particularly in high school basketball. It's as good as it is anywhere in the country.

But honestly, winning here won't mean anything when it comes to recruiting anymore. I love to talk about Walker Kessler and Jabari Smith and Chuma Okeke and JT Thor and Sharife Cooper and Jabari Smith and about seven or eight Atlanta kids that are in the NBA that developed at Auburn, won championships. But right now, when it comes to recruiting, I don't know how much that means to an Atlanta high school player.

Right now it is more about the NIL. It's become way more transactional. They don't care about the fact that I've

graduated 46 student-athletes in the last 11 years, that I've graduated 33 African American men in the last 11 years. That stuff used to matter. Unfortunately, it doesn't matter as much anymore.

It still matters to me. It still matters to Tom Izzo. It still matters to our university, and I'm proud of it. If you're uncomfortable hearing it, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for making you a little uncomfortable.

But we are still coaches, and these are still student-athletes, and we still have a responsibility to coach them as hard as we can. But when we're leaving them now, we need to leave them with a degree, and not just the ability to work at Subway, but to own five of them.

That's where we are right now, and I'm really happy about that.

Q. After the 2022 season and you lost Jabari and Walker, and since then you probably signed more transfers than you have freshmen. The result has been now you're here in the Sweet 16. Can you talk about that journey and your journey in recognizing what you needed to do?

BRUCE PEARL: The transfers that we've been able to get -- I have right now 11 -- actually 12 guys on scholarship. We get 13. I have never had 13 scholarship players since I've been at Auburn because I can't keep 13 happy. So one guy gets a walk-on scholarship every single year, and right now I actually have two in that category.

So the reason is you just want to put the kids in positions to be successful. I want to have enough, but I don't want to have too much. So I'm really, really pleased that with the exception of maybe one or two student-athletes since the transfer portal has opened, every single one of our transfers have come in and have had major impacts, been All-Conference, been starters.

So we pride ourselves on getting the right guys and making sure that we need them. That's the one thing about it. The difference between recruiting freshmen and young kids, they've got to come in and they've got to develop. You don't have to need them right away. If they want it right away, freshmen, you'd better get a great one like a Tahaad Pettiford, otherwise, they're going to have to be patient.

But when it comes to recruiting transfers, I think we have an obligation as coaches to recruit transfers who can have an impact for us right away, and that's what almost all of my transfers have done.

Q. A lot of talk about the portal, but I want to ask about

your star freshman guard Tahaad Pettiford. Did you kind of know he'd have the confidence to succeed against veteran guards? Was there ever a moment where you were concerned? Also, was there a moment where he kind of broke through for you?

BRUCE PEARL: Tahaad, he comes from a great family, and he's got great high school coaching and great AAU coaching. His dad has handled him like as good as any father could. He always played him up. He always played him against older kids. And Tahaad was always the smallest guy on the playground. He was always the littlest guy out there.

So therefore, he had so much to overcome, yet he might have been the best player out there. Tahaad was somewhat overlooked. He was ranked 25th, 26th coming out of high school. There aren't 25 high school freshmen in college this year that are better than Tahaad Pettiford. But he's got a chip on his shoulder. He's a little guy, and every time he goes out there to prove it.

I was wrong about Tahaad. I thought Tahaad would come in and be a scoring guard. Don't worry about running the team. Don't worry about being a point guard. Just come out and bang shots, guard a little bit, make stuff happen, just do what you do.

Instead, I recognized that, wow, he actually can handle the team. He can break pressure. He can close games. He can be a scoring point guard. So he's exceeded my expectations as far as being able to play point guard rather than just being a scoring guard.

He had very little drop up-and-down as a freshman. He was very, very consistent. Maybe at the end of the regular season, very beginning of the SEC Tournament, he may not have shot it as well for a couple games, and then he lived in the gym since then. Obviously he had a phenomenal weekend in Lexington to help us advance.

Q. I was wondering if you could speak about any history you have with Dusty May and the fact that he's rebuilt a roster kind of from scratch and brought them here?

BRUCE PEARL: How good of a hire was Dusty May for Michigan? How good of a hire was that?

A piece of history, back when I was a coach at University of Southern Indiana, USI in Evansville, Indiana, he played for Oakland City and played for Mike Sandifar. So we played them one time.

Then I just remembered him from being on Florida staffs,

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on Mike White's staff for a little bit, right? Am I correct about that? Okay.

Then my dad lived in South Florida, and my dad would sort of every now and then go to breakfast meetings with sort of basketball people down in South Florida that love basketball, anything for some bagels and cream cheese, anything. Dusty remembered my dad being at a couple of his breakfast meetings when he was trying to talk to basketball people about building the Florida Atlantic program.

Then the third thing would simply be when he hired KT Harrell. KT was a great player for us at Auburn my very first year. My first year at Auburn, the team had one or two players that belonged to the SEC. KT belonged not only to the SEC, but he was an SEC All-Star. We didn't have that much to go around him, and our guys knew it. Our guys had, as you would expect, a very tough year during regular season, but they never quit.

Yet our guys knew on that first year's team, KT's team, that we were going to get it going. They could tell by the way we were coaching, the way we were recruiting, the way we were treating them. I so wanted KT's team my first year to be a part of that foundation, to be a part of what was going to happen, and I didn't think it was possible for them because we just weren't talented enough.

That team came to Nashville and beat Mississippi State, beat Texas A&M, and beat LSU, three huge upsets, and then we played on the Saturday against Kentucky, a team that won the National Championship. We didn't belong in any of those games. That first year team, KT Harrell's team laid the groundwork for Auburn basketball in the future.

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