

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

Saturday, March 29, 2025

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

State Farm Arena

Auburn Tigers

Chad Baker-Mazara

Johni Broome

Dylan Cardwell

Denver Jones

Miles Kelly

Bruce Pearl

Elite Eight Pregame Media Conference



That's the biggest difference for him, his jump from last year to this year is he's kind of been able to sacrifice more and take on more of the mental strain for the team.

Q. Denver, this is for you. With regards to how you turned Michigan over yesterday 15 times and the ability to score 23 points off of those, what are you anticipating doing in terms of Michigan State, and how do you want to turn them over and be disruptive in the same way?

DENVER JONES: That's just Auburn basketball. Pressure ball. We just try not to let our opponents run our offense. We try to take their best players out of the offense, and that's what I feel like we're going to try to do tomorrow.

Just ball pressure, a lot of framing. That's probably about it.

Q. Johni, Coach talked about your relationship with Pettiford a little bit last night. Can you just tell me, when he came in, what was he like? Was he quiet? Was he confident?

JOHNI BROOME: He wasn't quiet, you know what I'm saying? He's from Jersey, so he has a little different type of energy to him. He's not quiet, though.

He came in, but he came in wanting to learn, wanting to compete, and wanting to kind of join what we had built. It definitely makes him special. Every night he steps on the court, he's trying to make an impact for us to win.

Q. Dylan, how have you kind of seen the Auburn fan base grow and rally around you guys over the past couple years? We seen the pictures yesterday. The campus was crazy. It was loud in here. How have you seen that build its way up?

DYLAN CARDWELL: It's a testimony to the program that Bruce Pearl's built. I wasn't here for it. I know I've been here for a long time, but his first year he talked about buying tickets now because it's going to be hard to get tickets in the future.

You can see down the line it's hard to get a ticket at home.

THE MODERATOR: We're going to go ahead and get started with the student-athletes. They'll be up here until 3:10.

Q. Dylan and Denver, what is it about Johni that has made him such an important leader for this team?

DENVER JONES: Man, just seeing the growth that he's made just from last year to this year, man. I watched him just work on a lot of things that he really wanted to work on, just to improve on, such as like his 3 ball has gotten a lot better just from last year to this year.

I feel like this year he speaks up a lot more, and that's just growth, just growth within him. That's what I feel like makes him a great leader.

DYLAN CARDWELL: First and foremost, all glory to my Lord and savior Jesus Christ.

Johni is just a great competitor. It's just been cool to see him take the pressure and the weight of Auburn basketball and put it on his shoulders and just kind of be there for us and have these huge care for the season. He's a hard worker, but I just want to commend him for his mental strength to bear the way that he does bear. Obviously have the National Player of the Year race going on but also the National Championship and wanting this team to win.



I came in when we were just getting hot. Obviously I came in two years after the Final Four run. I want to give a lot of credit to that Final Four team in 2019 to lay a foundation that allowed us to benefit from the fruits of their labor.

It was nothing that we've done, we've just tried to carry on the tradition and the torch that they set out for us. We're building off of their hard work.

Q. Jonny --

JOHNI BROOME: Johni.

Q. Johni, Bruce said yesterday that, if Michigan turned you over 15 times, that Michigan State could probably do 25 times. What do you see from their defense, and how dangerous are they from that side of the ball?

JOHNI BROOME: They're a good defensive team. They get out there a little bit. We've got to do a better job of taking care of the ball and limit our turnovers.

Q. Dylan and Miles and who ever else wants to comment on it. Could you just talk about the guys, the scout team guys, the walk-on guys, what they mean to you and how important are they in getting you to this place?

MILES KELLY: I think the scout team, we have one of the best scout team five in the country. They do a great job of repping out other team's sets and having us guard them, and they go at full speed at all times. It's like we're playing a full game before we actually play a game.

I think we have one of the best scout teams in the country player-wise, and they do a great job of listening to the coaches and learning the other team's plays and stuff like that so we can replicate it.

DYLAN CARDWELL: Back to what he said, we have the best five guys on the scout team in the country. They're the unsung heroes because they give us a good look of what the other team does, and they do it pretty much sometimes even harder or even faster than the other teams do. They give us a great look, and I'm grateful for the scout team.

Q. Johni and Miles, obviously a lot of negative talk about the transfer portal, but what does this team's success say about the value of players picking the right teams and teams picking the right players in the portal?

JOHNI BROOME: I think it just is a testament to the coaches and the coaching staff. When I got here, he

brought me in because he thought I was a good person. When he brought in more transfers like Chad, Denver, and Chaney, he said they were going to be good people that he was going to recruit.

Same thing he brought in with JP and Miles. They're good people. Turtle, Ja'Heim, he's a good person. I think when you're able to build a team how you want it and you can organize it by getting good guys in a good system, I think it's credit to the team in allowing us to be really deep, in depth team.

THE MODERATOR: Miles?

MILES KELLY: The transfer portal is kind of hard navigating it. Of course because there's a lot of schools and great programs recruiting you. For me, it was just the roster construction. I think we have one of the best rosters in the country, and that was a huge part in my recruitment.

BP and the staff did a great job of recruiting me, make my family and my people feel like family and stuff like that. To me it was a no brainer to come here. I wanted to win, and this is why I chose to come to Auburn.

Q. Denver and Miles, defensively the length that you guys have, particularly on the perimeter, how do you guys use that around the arc, and how do you feel that Michigan State's guards handle length?

DENVER JONES: I just feel like ball pressure is for sure going to be the key to the game. Just listen to the game plan. Coach is going to come out with a great game plan. Whatever they tell us today during practice, that's what we'll work on. That's how we'll try to disrupt their offense.

MILES KELLY: Our job is just to make their other guards uncomfortable, and I think the coaching staff is going to put together a great scouting report in detail to go further from there. The main thing is our guard we've got to make them uncomfortable.

Q. Bruce, I was wondering Michigan State's depth has obviously been a strength this year, but they've shrunk the rotation a little bit lately. What did you think of them benching their center last night after starting all 35 games, and the ability to do that? And what do you expect tomorrow?

BRUCE PEARL: I'd say they'll probably go back to playing deep. It's historically been the way we've played. I've had 10 guys with double digit minutes almost throughout my entire career.

Last night we got down about seven, we played eight. The



timeouts are longer. The halftime's longer. So you have a little bit more of a chance to rest your players. And yet I thought fatigue was a factor in the second half with Michigan. Our guys managed to not succumb to fatigue.

I think Michigan State's won a lot of games late and close because they were fresh enough to be able to win those games. So their depth could be a factor at the end of the game tomorrow.

I'd like to try to play a little deeper if we possibly can just to make sure that we've got enough in the tank to close it out.

Q. For Bruce Pearl, Tom Izzo, I believe, 8-2 in the Elite Eight. He's into this stage quite a bit. Just your history with him, any past memories you have that you can share, and just your thoughts about --

BRUCE PEARL: One of those 8-2s was against Tennessee, 70-69. We had the ball with a chance to win it in a tie ballgame. The shot clock, I think it was 20-something seconds. So we ran something. I just wanted to get a good look, and we got Scottie Hopson a pretty good look, and he got fouled.

Scottie made the first one, we're up one. I think there's eight or nine seconds left to go in the game. The head coach made a bad mistake. I put my two bigs -- I had both 4 and 5 on the free-throw, offensive free-throw set, Wayne Chism and Brian Williams. Scottie misses the second free throw. They get the rebound and the scramble, outlet it, get it down the floor, and we foul. They go to the line and make both, and win the game.

If I have my defense set, we have a chance to really -- they would have made a different play than other just a couple of free throws. I haven't been of late very often, but I cost my team in that moment.

Tom Izzo is 10-0 in the NCAA tournament against the SEC. I bet you didn't know that, pretty good. There's a reason -- one of the reasons why I look at Michigan State over the years -- and don't forget, I was an assistant at Iowa. So I've been familiar with Tom. We were both assistants in St. Cecilia's gym when he was working for Jud Heathcote, and I was working for Dr. Tom Davis.

They've always been as athletic as anybody in the backcourt. Michigan State has elite athletes in the backcourt. Therefore, like my athletes, they guard. They can score in multiple ways. Then his front lines are always big, strong, physical, play really hard. Sometimes better than others, but that's been the makeup.

So Michigan State's always one of the most athletic teams

in the Big Ten. Now, I think we've won six or seven in a row against the Big Ten. Bet you didn't know that. And the reason why is, I think, our athleticism in the SEC has been a factor against the teams that we've played against in the Big Ten.

It will be interesting to see whether it's not as big a factor tomorrow because of how good their athletes are. I'm obviously challenging my guards and challenging our athletes, but I think from that standpoint it's an interesting matchup.

Q. Dylan, I remember back in February you said that Bruce had recruited a roster of killers, some guys that aren't right in the head. How do you feel like the personality, the edge of this roster, has helped you guys now that we're in the deep waters of March Madness here?

DYLAN CARDWELL: These guys have big balls, bro. At the end of the day, we've got Tahaad Pettiford from New Jersey. We got Chad from -- I don't know where you're from. Dominican Republic or wherever you're from.

No, BP does a great job of recruiting guys with that mentality that don't want to lose. He always tells us you just have to hate losing. These guys hate losing, and it's just been cool to see over the past couple of months how before the Texas A&M game, we were 8-0 on the road in the SEC. These guys keep competing and keep competing, and we end up being down nine and go on a however many run.

It's just cool to see these guys just buy in and just have the kind of killer mentality.

Q. Coach, I wanted to speak a little bit about the elite athletes you said Michigan State have. They've actually been especially good at getting to the free-throw line the first three tournament games, doubled up their opponent in each of them. What are some things you've been seeing from them that you want to limit in particular?

BRUCE PEARL: It's a great question. Michigan State shoots more free throws than anybody else in the Big Ten, or they're very close to it. We have to do a good job of defending without fouling. That's one of the keys.

It's interesting guys, we had our first meeting after breakfast this morning, and we spent about 45 minutes on Michigan State. You guys are asking all these interesting questions about their backcourt, about how we're going to do this, how we're going to do that. We are in the middle of it right now. We're in the middle of figuring it out. We don't

even know exactly what our game plan is going to be.

But one of them will be, Michigan State does a great job of turning corners. They do a great job of initiating contact. I know in the game last night against Ole Miss, it was a very even game, but they doubled them up in going to the foul line. So we're going to have to do a good job of defending without fouling.

THE MODERATOR: We've got about four more minutes with the student-athletes before we let them go.

Q. Johni, this is for you. Yesterday in the game you all had 19 of your 48 rebounds on the offensive side and were able to produce 21-9 advantage on second chance points. Is that something that is just an organic situation for you all, or is that something that you are proactively trying to engage in getting those second and third chance opportunities to score?

JOHNI BROOME: You know, that wasn't -- a lot of it was off of our own misses. We missed a lot of layups. So in order to make up for your missed layups, you've got to get the ball back for your team, and that's kind of what we kind of did.

I think the reason why we went to the glass a little bit more was because of the missed layups. I feel like we capitalized a little more on just finishing. Coach talks about it all the time about being able to finish around the basket and at a high clip, and yesterday we didn't do it. So I think the offensive rebounds came off of wanting to keep the possession alive.

Q. For Chad and Dylan, Coach mentioned the athleticism in the SEC. Obviously half of the Elite Eight is made up of SEC teams. How do you think that prepared you all for the run that you're on right now?

CHAD BAKER-MAZARA: I think Coach and the coaching staff have prepared us very well. We've played almost every team that's in the Elite Eight. So I feel like we're confident enough that we've been through those battles. Most of them we actually have won earlier in the year.

Now we've just got to go back to what our coaching staff, what they're going to do, what the game plan's going to be, and just take care of business.

DYLAN CARDWELL: SEC is the best conference in the country. It's been a gauntlet this year. Every game we played has been a Quad 1 game. We had to bring it every single game, whether at home, whether on the road. We've been battle tested this whole year, nonconference or conference play.

The SEC has kind of prepared us for that level of physicality, level of desperation that we do need in March Madness.

THE MODERATOR: Time for one more for student-athletes.

Q. Dylan, BP touched on it just then about defending without fouling. How do you guys kind of keep that same aggressiveness but avoid getting in foul trouble against a team that likes to get to the free-throw line and attack the basket?

DYLAN CARDWELL: Just being disciplined and resisting the urge to swipe down, resisting the urge to gamble on plays. Resisting the urge really just to get the big time block or big time steal. We wall up and they make a shot and they just run back on offense and see if they can do it again.

Other than that, just being disciplined. Tom Izzo has a very disciplined team, and to have a chance to beat them, we're going to need to be very disciplined tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: You guys are free to go.

Q. Coach, on Tahaad, I know you talked last night about his dad and your assistant. Is there anything else, though, that allows him to kind of thread that needle between being confident, but not cocky, willing to come off the bench, willing to learn, but still hitting those big shots in big moments?

BRUCE PEARL: I don't think I've ever had a player that has been as good as Tahaad that never started -- oh, he actually started one game, I think, because Denver was hurt, and had the least amount of noise from either the player or his family. It's just not been a factor.

His dad's as hard on him as I am, and that doesn't happen all the time. You can coach them as hard as you love them. His dad loves him and coaches him hard, and he wanted him to play for somebody that he knew would coach him hard.

I just think that Tahaad feels prepared. He's got a great stroke, and he's always played against older players. That's the one thing his dad did when he was growing up is he always played him up even though he was small. So he's been playing guys older than him his whole life. So what's the difference in the NCAA Tournament?

Q. Bruce, the Elite Eight is all 1, 2, and 3 seeds. Does that feel like a symptom of talent consolidating among

top programs? Is it hard to draw sweeping conclusions off of one bracket? I guess what do you just make of the lack of what we would call Cinderellas in this bracket?

BRUCE PEARL: I agree, that's probably a function of the talent pools that the commitment and NIL to some of the high major programs. I think you may have seen that in the football playoff too, the teams that were most invested in their student-athletes were the teams that were able to be able to advance.

I would love to see us get to a place where we feel like we're truly playing for a National Championship because we're all playing by the same rules. I'm really pleased that we're able to invest in our student-athletes. The NCAA was late to doing that. The market has demonstrated that because of what these guys are worth and what this game is obviously what March Madness is all about.

But there are more guidelines in professional sports to how you compensate your athletes than there are right now, and we've got to find a way to figure that out.

Q. Bruce, you got a lot of guys in your locker room that probably won't play, didn't play yesterday, won't play. The scout team guys, the walk-on guys. Can you just talk about what -- how important they are in preparing to play.

BRUCE PEARL: I got this from Dr. Tom Davis. Dr. Tom Davis, they called it the gray team. Remember back in the day when you used to have those gray cotton T-shirts that you would wear that didn't have anybody's name on it, just a gray T-shirt. We call it the gray team. I still have that.

What it is is five to seven guys that are walk-ons, and I've actually got a couple of them that are actually on scholarship, that are practice players. I don't like practicing best-on-best in season. We do it all preseason. We do it all summer. We do it all fall. But if you go best-on-best during your season, somebody's going to get hurt.

Another thing too is, as our team advances from scout to scout to scout, you're building on your own system. I don't want to have to have my players playing somebody else's system. So the scout team this week, for example, ran Michigan stuff. They ran their OBs, they defended like Michigan. Now, they can't do it to the talent level that Michigan did it, but we can still run the same actions. So our guys are getting a second look when they play in that game.

Those guys play -- and when my great team has good practices, we usually have good performances.

Let's just say Darren Smith would definitely be one of them.

Q. Bruce, you've called Johni one of the best transfers we've seen. For him to lead this team to the Final Four and potentially beyond, what would that mean for him in college basketball history?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, I would think that he's got a chance to have been maybe the most impactful transfer in college basketball history with his three years running.

Now, I think you're right, a lot of that's going to depend on how this finishes up. But I just -- we're a team made up of only one five star. One of the things I reminded my guys of, there are several guys on the Michigan State roster that are McDonald's All-Americans. I have one, and that's Tahaad Pettiford. He's pretty good.

Most of our guys are guys that were mid-majors or junior college or Division II. I'm not going to let Michigan State play the underdog card even though we're No. 1 seed and they're No. 2 seed, no, they're Michigan State. They're Kansas, they're Duke, they're North Carolina, and we're Auburn. We know our place. We know what we're trying to go up against, and we know the uphill battle that it is when you play against a Hall of Fame coach and obviously a legendary program.

Somehow I've got to find a way to win so that Charles Barkley can give Magic Johnson some crap and represent. Magic's always floating those rings at Charles, right? He's always floating those rings, and Charles ain't got any rings. I've got to try to get some rings for Charles so he can float them back at Magic.

Q. Bruce, is there a certain trait that Tom Izzo-led teams possess that kind of helps them pull out late games? Considering both you guys won close games yesterday, is that a trait that Auburn has as well?

BRUCE PEARL: I think this team this year has won some close games, won a majority of close games, especially early in the season. We had a lot of last possession games we managed to win, good free-throw shooting, solid defense, not beating yourself.

The thing I would say with Michigan State is this year's team is extremely deep, but they're always so well-conditioned. They're not going to beat themselves in the sense that they're going to be smart about shots that they take and plays that they make.

I do think, while they could miss a game full of shots when it comes down to the last five or six minutes, they think



they're going to bang them. They do, they believe they're going to bang those shots in, and they have all year. Then when they do get to the foul line, they shoot a great percentage.

The challenge is this. Michigan's front line, big, physical, and our bigs were able to be big and physical with their bigs. Typically what happens in officiating is they let the bigs play. There's more contact down in the post. The challenge with guarding Michigan State is their guards are the one that shoots all the free throws.

Like for us, Johni Broome shoots more free throws than anybody else on my team because we go inside, we post-up, and we do some inside offense, but they let the bigs play on the inside. Then you get out on the perimeter, and those guys are turning corners, and they're driving and getting hit. And because that action takes out away from the perimeter, a lot of times that stuff gets called more than the contact on the inside.

Q. Bruce, looking at how you guys closed out the game last night, does it surprise you sometimes how fast your team can turn it on and dominate a game?

BRUCE PEARL: We obviously locked in defensively, and then the fact that we were able to get -- we like to go to the hot hand. When Denver banged a shot, he got the next two. When Tahaad banged a shot, he got the next two or three, and Johni had a spurt. Therein lies the spurtability.

The biggest thing was holding Michigan to what it was, 65, 66 points -- whatever it was, 65 points. That's why we won the game. We were able to turn them over and hurt them on the offensive glass. Michigan State is not going to give up 18 rebounds in case anybody wasn't aware of that. They're just too good.

Q. Bruce, it's the third game in a row Dylan has led you all in plus-minus. The stats aren't always going to bear it out, but can you kind of quantify his defensive impact for you all?

BRUCE PEARL: Dylan Cardwell blows away every analytic that's out there. You can't look at the stat sheet and think he's going to lead in plus-minus, and he does all the time.

What does he do? He dominates the boards. He's the best defender on the floor. He doesn't turn the basketball over. I think he's got a chance to play in the NBA because he can score in the air, he can defend any position. He'll rebound his position, and he can guard 1 through 5.

Okay, so he can't shoot a jump shot. So, but he's going to

hand the ball to some guys that can shoot shots. I think he's got a real future at the highest levels.

Q. You said you're not going to let Michigan State play the underdog card. Who is the underdog in this game? Are you the underdog?

BRUCE PEARL: Auburn. Auburn. This is the third time in our history we've gone to the Elite Eight. This is uncharted water for us. We're talking about Michigan State. We're talking about Tom Izzo.

Q. Coach, when you're planning and trying to get the blueprint for the scouting report, I know you've said you're in the thick of it right now, but have you thought about how you're anticipating Michigan State will guard you in all aspects of their defensive schemes and how they're going to guard the pick-and-rolls, the slips, the short rolls, and the slot?

BRUCE PEARL: Yes. We know what they're going to do. Michigan State is -- one thing about a great coach and a great system, he's going to do what he's going to do, and he's not going to try to trick you. This is what we do. See if you can deal with it.

We also know they do a great job of guarding the 3-point line and run people off the 3-point line. They're not going to beat us from -- they're not going to try to let us win the battle from 3. They're going to make us make tough 2s and try to defend us without fouling us.

That said, that's where we've got to go. Because they guard differently than, say, Michigan in certain ways, we'll run some of the same actions, but we'll get different looks out of those actions based on the way Michigan State guards, and we'll have to guard Michigan State a little differently because Michigan -- six out of Michigan State's top scorers are guards, 6 out of 7.

Last night the two leading scorers for Michigan were their big kids. So that's a completely different matchup for us.

Q. Just asked Dylan this, but he said you recruited this roster of killers, guys that aren't right in the head. Where have you seen that help you guys now that we're in the deep waters of March Madness?

BRUCE PEARL: I think what you also heard was that I promised Johni Broome that I'd bring in guys that were good people, that he would want to be friends with. I made that promise to all of them.

Yeah, Chad Baker's a killer from the standpoint of his ability to just go out there and make plays and make shots

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

and he's very passionate -- and fearless at times. Tahaad is a different personality than Chad, but also demonstrates great fearlessness.

But they have really good character. They're really good people. They're really good friends. There's a love to them that exists.

And we work really hard at trying to bring in those kind of people, guys that are going to make sacrifices. You want to be on a great team, you've got to make sacrifices. You've got to share, and you've got to hold each other accountable.

I think that's also a big part of what this locker room is all about. This is a team of faith. You see every time they make a 3 ball, they're calling God. That's what they're doing. I'm getting e-mails, and I'm getting voicemail messages from parents of 8-year-old girls going my daughter banged her first 3, and she called God, and the parents were so excited about it.

Now, what that also does, it gives me an opportunity as a teacher to say, okay, listen if we're going to call God and we're going to do that, then we can't act this way or that way. That's why we've graduated 46 kids in 11 years. Auburn basketball has graduated 46 student-athletes in 11 years. I'll tell you what, you go look in your high major, go look, it would be really hard to find anybody graduated any more than that.

That discipline and accountability, plus the faith factor, is really what the chemistry of our program is all about. Not just recruiting a bunch of killers.

Q. Bruce, I wanted to ask you about two Michigan State players in particular. One, obviously, Coen Carr, you recruited him. What you've seen in his growth and development over the course of the season. Then secondly, we've talked a lot about the point guards and how much they mean to Izzo's program. Jeremy Fears, where have you seen his progression over the course of the season?

BRUCE PEARL: First of all, next time I get to the Elite Eight, I'm going to have to bring more people from the Auburn newspaper because how many Free Press guys are you guys going to let in here? You got one in the back too, all right.

I'll tell you what, pronouncing No. 55's name for me again. Okay, Coen Carr. Incredible athlete, incredible toughness, work ethic, and how he impacts the game. It was raw as far as his potential, right? With Tom he's gotten more skilled, he's handling the ball better, he's explosive, but

he's under control. He's shooting it better. He's got touch, free throws, just great, great growth.

And understand Fears, know his dad, know his brother. His brother played against us at Oklahoma. Incredible talent, incredible gift, fearless, a killer.

They've got two terrific point guard that's can play make and can score. Obviously it's been a great position for them.

Miles Kelly and Denver Jones are really solid defenders, and our guards are going to get a real test as far as their ability to stay in front of Michigan State's guards. It's going to be a real challenge.

Q. Coach, you just talked about Denver Jones a little bit, and you've been championing him as one of the best defenders, on-ball defenders. Do you still feel like he's not getting enough credit for how well, particularly last night, Tre Donaldson had a tough time being able to operate?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, I'd say this. I want to thank the Naismith Group. Throughout the season, they watched Denver, and he was a nominee for one of the top 10 defensive players in the country. So I actually think, no, he's actually now getting a lot of attention in that regard. He certainly has earned it.

His ability to be able to be out front in our defense sort of builds everything from the back. If you have somebody that can do a pretty good job of pressuring the ball and contain the ball without fouling, that's a great, great place to start.

As a result, Miles Kelly, Tahaad Pettiford, Chad Baker-Mazara, those guards have all picked their defensive games up so that there's not such a big gap between them and our best defender Denver Jones.

Q. You talked briefly a little bit ago about the matchup in the Elite Eight with Michigan State in 2010. I'm just curious if you see any parallels or similarities to that game or those teams and this game and these teams now.

BRUCE PEARL: Boy, I haven't had time to study that, you know what I mean? I'm barely through my third Michigan State game, right? So the parallels are that Tom's coaching and I'm coaching. That would be a parallel. Steven has played against Michigan State. He's now coaching against them.

I thought we shot a good enough percentage when we

played against them. There's some stat that, when you shoot 50 percent or better, like you've got a chance to beat Michigan State. If you don't, you've got no chance. We actually shot 50 percent or better and lost. We blew away the stats.

Listen, it's going to take -- Michigan State was 17-3 in the Big Ten. Michigan won the Big Ten tournament, but Michigan State won the Big Ten, and they are the best team in that league.

Q. BP, you've said that you made the deal with Johni and Dylan that, if they stayed, you'd start them. Could you have imagined this journey coming this far with that configuration, because it's not commonly done in today's basketball?

BRUCE PEARL: And what's also not commonly done is I don't think I can ever remember in -- I don't know how many years I've been coaching, 40-something, whatever it is -- ever in a preseason telling a player who had never started that I promised, if he came back, he'd start every game, and that was Dylan.

Dylan played for me as a freshman. After his junior year playing behind Kofi Cockburn at Oak Hill, he hardly played. So he transferred to McEachern High School. The Atlanta Athletic Association, the high school association in their infinite wisdom denied him the ability to play his senior year. Terrible.

Poor kid, single mom, all he tried to do was go McEachern College Preparatory School, go play with Sharife Cooper and a great group of guys, and somehow, because he didn't transfer the right way, they made the kid ineligible. Shame on them.

He hasn't played a single year, but still we take him to Auburn. Plays his freshman year, doesn't start plays. Then I bring in Walker Kessler. What do most kids do when you bring in Walker Kessler to their position? They transfer, they flee. Not Dylan Cardwell. The following year, he's going to be a junior, pretty good player. What do I do? I bring in Johni Broome? What do most guys do? Flee. Not Dylan Cardwell. He stays.

Stays another year with Johni. Always coming off the bench. Playing 10 to 15 minutes. So finally we brought him over at the end of the season and said, look, if Johni comes back, two things got to happen. You either need to leave because it's not fair to play you behind him again, you deserve more, or I'll tell you right now, I'm going to start the two of you every game together if you stay.

The other thing I did, we lost Jaylin Williams, who was one

of our best players a year ago, and I did not go recruit another starter out of the portal. We didn't. I empowered Chaney Johnson, Dylan Cardwell, and Johni Broome, and I rolled with those guys. I said, I'm rolling with you three. They were all going to be seniors. Three front line guys are usually not enough to get through the season.

When we recruited Turtle, Ja'Heim Hudson, he was a backup at SMU. And Ja'Heim knew coming in, look, you've got a chance to play on this really good team, but these three seniors are really good. Ja'Heim said, you know what, I want to be part of a great team and you know what coach, I'll work my way on to the floor, I will. Johni Broome turns his ankle at South Carolina.

Ja'Heim Hudson plays at Georgia when they were nationally ranked. Had a big game in that game, and we beat Georgia. If we don't beat Georgia at Georgia, we don't win the SEC. Without Ja'Heim Hudson, we don't win the SEC. Our guys don't have rings without a guy that's my ninth or tenth man.

The point was just to empower the kids. A lot of times the coach puts 13 guys out there and promise them everything and say, look, you guys figure it out. Iron sharpens iron. I don't believe in that. I have 11 kids on scholarship. I play 10 guys double digit minutes.

As a result, I think our guys trust us.

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