

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Regional Semifinal - Arkansas vs Florida

Wednesday, March 26, 2025

San Francisco, California, USA

Chase Center

Florida Gators

Coach Todd Golden

Sweet 16 Pregame Media Conference



TODD GOLDEN: It's great to be back in the Bay. Really proud of our program and our team, to be able to find a way to make it to the Sweet 16.

Great games last weekend against Norfolk State. I thought we showed a lot of grit over our win over UConn. I thought we played well and had us in a bind late in the game. We found a way to push through get a big win in a big moment. And just really excited to compete against Maryland tomorrow.

Q. You go back 20 years ago, you were a freshman on Saint Mary's bench. And a few years later you were a senior starter, made the NAAs both of those years. What do you remember I guess from those NCAA trips, how they may have set the foundation for where you are now?

TODD GOLDEN: Those trips were a lot shorter than this one we're on now. We lost in the first round in both of those games.

But it was incredible to be a part of kind of the beginning of the building of Coach Bennett's program at Saint Mary's. That first tournament team you referenced was his first tournament team. I think that was in his fourth or fifth year after he had just completely flipped that program from a two-win program to 25 wins, I think we had in our first NCAA Tournament year.

It was great to experience that. But even better, my senior year because I was playing and actually impacting the results of the games.

A big part of who I am as a coach came from my time playing for Coach Bennett and Coach Kyle Smith. And just

incredibly grateful to have that experience with them.

Q. You had three guys up here a minute ago, and they said they don't bring up your playing days too much or you don't either because there's so much razzing that goes on. But it also meant a lot to them to sort of see USF yesterday and Original Joe's and places that were part of your journey to get to Florida and this level. What's that been like for you to be back and take them to a few places like that?

TODD GOLDEN: It's been amazing. When the bracket came out and we saw we were the 1 seed in the West and obviously you see that the regionals in San Francisco, you can't help but think about how awesome it would be to be able to experience that. But there's two games before that that you have to find a way to advance.

And once we were able to get past UConn on Sunday, it kind of all hit me and Megan and our family that we'd have a chance to come back to the Bay Area. Just landing in San Francisco yesterday and just kind of driving back through the city, I had to pinch myself a little bit.

It was a full-circle moment, going back to San Francisco and seeing Chris Gerlufsen and those guys, a couple of them had worked with us at Florida and had been hired back here at San Francisco. And seeing some great old friends there was amazing.

And to cap it with OJ's last night, the (indiscernible) did an incredible job hosting us. It was just remarkable experience. Our guys really enjoyed it. I think it's an experience that a lot of these guys haven't had, being able to come all the way west and be in a great city like San Francisco.

We actually went down to Crissy Field and saw the bridge this morning. We're trying to soak it all up the best we can while maintaining our focus, but it's been a great trip so far.

Q. Was it hard to get that size group into Original Joe's?

TODD GOLDEN: Initially it was. We went to North Beach last night.



Q. Are your parents coming in from Arizona?

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, my dad is here. Him and my sister got in this morning. Yes.

Q. You mentioned Randy and Kyle. Any specific examples of lessons you learned from them that have helped you on your coaching journey?

TODD GOLDEN: Too many to count.

Q. Highlights.

TODD GOLDEN: Couple. I think the best thing that I learned from those guys was really just kind of mental and physical toughness. I think coming to Saint Mary's, I got there when I was 17 -- I'd just turned 18 when I got on campus, I weighed 150 pounds and probably had an irrational level of confidence when I arrived in terms of being able to impact.

Coach Bennett made it very clear quickly that it wasn't going to be easy and that I had my work cut out for me.

But I think the big lesson playing for Coach Bennett was that his program was a meritocracy. And I walked on originally, and he didn't care. He wanted guys that were going to help him win games regardless of what our scholarship status was or height or weight, whatever that was. That gave me an opportunity to break into the lineup as a redshirt sophomore.

Both him and Kyle are two of my biggest mentors, with Bruce being the other one. A lot of the things we do at our program at Florida mimic and copy kind of what we did at Saint Mary's, just in terms of it being a meritocracy, using analytics to drive a lot of the decisions we make, and not worrying about rankings and things of that nature when recruiting -- just finding guys that have great attitudes, great work ethics and, most importantly, want to be at the University of Florida.

Coach Bennett used to get on me playing fantasy baseball. That was something he would always get on me about. Kyle would always challenge my toughness and make sure that I was competing the right way.

But I look back on those times incredibly fondly, and a big reason as to why I've been able to get where I am today.

Q. I just quizzed some of the guys in the locker room about your Saint Mary's stat that you once held as the all-time leader in free-throw percentage. They were surprised by that. Do you think it's time to brush out some of the highlights and show them who their coach

is?

TODD GOLDEN: There's not that many highlights, but the free-throw percentage is one. I have one game to pull back on my senior year. We played Gonzaga. I went 6-for-6 from 3 and we won that game in overtime. That was an incredible moment.

But these guys know that I can shoot the ball a little bit. I was kind of a one-trick pony. I was a good decision-maker and did my job just being a good blender for the team.

When I feel like I have to keep them in check, sometimes I'll shoot against them and see if I can still beat them. But other than that I can't move anymore. I'm just fortunate to have really good players that can still do that.

Q. Wanted to ask you about Walter's path to Florida. Just because he had a very unusual recruitment. He had all these offers for football and ultimately abandoned them to pursue basketball. Can you speak to his development and what that sort of says about him as a person in that he did take that huge bet on himself even though probably the safer route was to go and be a college safety?

TODD GOLDEN: If you know Walter, his level of belief in himself as well as his teammates and kind of everything he does is at an incredibly high level. I didn't know Walter really until after his sophomore year at Iona. But I learned more about him in my first year as a coach at Florida.

Getting to know him I can totally understand why he was willing to make that plunge and make that jump in terms of sticking with basketball even though he wasn't heavily recruited. He loves the game. He really understands it. I think he's got an incredible mind for the game of basketball. And it's what he's passionate about.

If you know Walt, you understand passion is kind of what drives him in all facets, whether it's his beautiful daughter, whether it's being back in the state of Florida, whether it's leading our program back to national prominence. He takes a lot of pride in those specific things. And when we got to know him and his mother, Cherie, and the family on the recruiting visit, we knew he was special in the way he carried himself and his attitude and mentality.

And we've been the beneficiaries of having him in our program here for the past two years. I think it's been a mutually beneficial relationship. Florida has been great for him, allowing him to come home and play in front of his family, be a good family man, being able to live with his daughter and be a great father.

Obviously we've benefited a ton at the University of Florida having him in our program. He's kind of clean swept all the AP, first team All-America things you can get across the board. In my humble estimation he's been the best guard in America this year.

It's just been a great relationship, a great marriage. And I know both sides will look incredibly fondly back on his time here and what he's been able to do for our program.

Q. Kevin Willard came in here earlier and said Walter reminds him of Steph Curry because of his ability to shoot off the dribble. Do you agree with that comparison or do you think there's a different NBA player he reminds you of?

TODD GOLDEN: I think Walt is -- you can pull a lot of similarities from his style of play to NBA players. Obviously the way he shoots the basketball. Especially to people in the Bay, it might be crazy to compare him to Steph -- he's won a ton of championships and MVPs, but from a college version I think it's applicable to say he's similar to Steph. His off-balance shooting, his ability to get his shot off at different times and just his confidence to let it fly from deep. I think those things are very similar to compare to Steph.

I think he plays a lot like Jalen Brunson, the way he can handle the ball, but get off it, get the ball back and be a play-maker, decision-maker.

He's done a great job setting up teammates all year. He's turned into a really complete player, especially on the offensive end. He's done a great job leading our team all year.

Q. What's your favorite meal at Original Joe's?

TODD GOLDEN: Hard to say. The (indiscernible) I love. I went with the prime rib last night. You know being here in San Francisco you can't go wrong.

Q. Follow-up question more related to basketball, you played in the tournament, center stage, and now you have players. What's the difference between being a player realizing the dream and now seeing as a coach and watching these guys live out their dream and try to get where you guys want to go eventually?

TODD GOLDEN: I think as a coach you have a much better understanding how quickly it can end. I think as a player you get to Selection Sunday for us, obviously won the SEC championship this year. We're just finishing a game. We're flying back home, and you have the rush of excitement figuring out where you are what your seed is

and where you're headed.

And you wake up the next day, you're practicing, if you're not on your stuff and don't play well you can go home and your season is over on Thursday. Just as quickly as the excitement comes of making the tournament, it can be gone. Fortunately for us we were able to get through the first weekend.

As a coach, that lingers in the back of your mind. You want to make sure you allow your players and your program to enjoy it the most you can. But at the same time you can't take anything for granted in terms of the opportunity because it can be gone just as quickly as it's here.

I think that's what we've tried to balance with our staff in terms of what we're articulating to our players -- we've got to enjoy this but at the same time we just can't slip. We can't let anything be taken for granted because, as I said, you can be going home if you don't play well.

Q. What's it say about the guys that they can be this jokester group -- they described themselves that way -- but balance it when the ball goes up? Is that part of the reason that they're doing so well?

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, I believe so. I think we have great talent on our team, really from top to bottom. But the nine that are playing right now, they're all talented players and do different things well.

The separator for our team is what I call our team talent, the way our guys play together -- the unselfishness, their willingness to support whoever's night it is. One guy can be hot and we have no bad body language. We have nobody just disappointed that it's not them.

That's really why we've been successful and so consistent all year, I believe. The three guys that you guys just spoke to, our senior leaders, do a great job keeping the environment light and making sure we don't get too just tight in the moment, but at the same time understanding when it's time to practice and time to game plan and time to scout, that we've got to make sure we approach it with the right level of sincerity.

They've been amazing. I certainly don't take them for granted. It's going to be a bittersweet day when we finish up and they move on and it's going to be tough to replace them.

But they're a unique special group. Those three leaders are a huge reason as to why we are where we are right now.

Q. Will Randy and Kyle have to ask you for tickets? Are you going to be able to see them?

TODD GOLDEN: Kyle should be here any moment. He's coming over to practice. So you can ask him. I'm going to blow Randy up. I asked him if he is going to come to practice or the game. All he texted back was, "portal, thanks."

I think he'll be working over these next couple days. But if he hits me for a late ticket request, I'll make sure we find a way to get him in the building now.

Q. Is that strange, though, that your two mentors might have to ask you for tickets?

TODD GOLDEN: I don't think it's strange. If nothing else, it's a credit to them. As I've said, a lot of what we do in our program mimics and mirrors what Randy's done at Saint Mary's the last 25 years and what Kyle's been able to do -- whether it's at Columbia, San Francisco, Washington State, now at Stanford -- making the ACC semis; they should have beat Louisville. Bad break at the end of the game, they had 20 wins. He's one of the best coaches in America. And I think our ability to implement a similar program at a place like Florida has led us to have the success we've had.

Q. How would you reflect on both the swiftness of your journey -- six years to being a head coach to be in this position -- and what year this has been like, the tumult of this year with some of the off-court stuff you've dealt with, if you could reflect on both of those?

TODD GOLDEN: I've been fortunate to be able to play for and be a part of incredible programs my whole life. Started in high school. Played for Dan Mannix, a Hall of Fame head coach in Phoenix, Arizona. Won over 500 or 600 games. Instilled a level of toughness in our program.

Playing a bunch for Kyle and Randy at Saint Mary's, winning program. You learn there's no shortcuts that can be taken. Just have to have a level of consistency in your approach to be successful.

And then working for Kyle at Columbia and getting to work for Bruce Pearl at Auburn, that was a big turning point in my career because Randy and Kyle operate a lot differently than Bruce. It proved and showed to me that there's different ways to skin a cat, for lack of a better term, in terms of running a successful program.

And we take a little bit from each of those buckets in doing what we do. But I've learned very quickly that you've got to

surround yourself with great people, both on your staff and the players in your program. I think we've been able to do that in the three years we've been at Florida.

In regards to your next question, we've just kept our head down and focused, and we haven't let some of the outside attention disrupt us and take us off our path. I'll continue to handle some of those situations after the season's over, but for now we're continuing on winning basketball games and trying to make it to the Final Four.

Q. Last time you coached in San Francisco it was a tough one on senior night against Gonzaga. How eager are you to get that taste out of your mouth tomorrow?

TODD GOLDEN: Yeah, you know, most teams that play Gonzaga have rough endings. So that wasn't anything too crazy. But it's more about again just coming back here and having an opportunity to bring my program, our program back to the Bay, an incredible opportunity against another East Coast team.

My hope is that our fans will travel well. I think we'll have a lot of Bay Area support here tomorrow both from the city and the other side of the bridge Moraga and East Bay coming over. My hope they'll give us a little extra jolt of energy in this game tomorrow because Maryland's a great team and Coach Willard has done a great job. They're freaky talented.

Watching them on tape, impressed with the players and the way they play. Similar to us, they had a tough game in game two. Colorado State had them on the ropes. They made some big plays down the stretch.

That drive finish that Queen had over Morton, off-balance floater off the top of the glass was an amazing shot. And sometimes you need to catch breaks like that to make deep runs. And I think both teams kind of come into this game feeling like a little fresh and like we've got nothing to lose. So it should be a great game tomorrow, and we're excited to be back here.

Q. I know typically you guys aren't big on doubling the post with Queen and Reese presenting themselves as a piece down there. Awesome front court. Will you stick with probably not doubling the post? And on the flip side, play a lot of drop with Reese. Are you prepared for both drop and hedge, how do you see it on that side of the court?

TODD GOLDEN: I'm not going to give you too much on that first one because I assume somebody from the Maryland program will watch this and see what I have to

say.

We know we have to throw some different looks at them, I'll say that. I think Derik Queen is one of the most talented players in college basketball. The way he can play with the ball in his hands, he has incredible ball handling skills, great feel, great touch around the rim.

Reese is just a very physical specimen, great finisher, right shoulder jump hook. Does a good job.

The game seems like it comes easy to him. He doesn't look like he's expending so much energy but he's always making great plays. Both those guys are great players.

As for the defensive side of the ball, their angle, definitely prepared for drop. I think that's pretty consistent in the way they play. They do a great job using their size and length around the rim. And we've got to be prepared for that.

We see that in our league a little bit. Alabama drops a little bit. I think even in our last game, UConn at certain times they hard showed a little bit, they drop a little bit. But we'll be prepared for their ball screen coverage, for sure.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports