

# NCAA Women's Basketball Championship: First Four - Auburn vs Arizona

Wednesday, March 20, 2024

Storrs, Connecticut, USA

Gampel Pavilion

**Auburn Tigers**

**Coach Johnnie Harris**

**Honesty Scott-Grayson**

**Taylen Collins**

Media Conference

**Q. Can you first just talk about what you know about Arizona, and then talk about playing this game in this venue where you look up and there are 11 National Championship banners on the wall. It's kind of a place where a lot of women's basketball fans show up every night.**

HONESTY SCOTT-GRAYSON: Well, I've been coming here since I was little, so it's definitely -- to finally be able to play on the court, it's a big accomplishment for me personally.

As far as Arizona, we know that they play a brand of defense kind of similar to ours. We know they're real aggressive, so I feel like it's all going to be about a game of turnovers.

Just following our game plan and sticking to our scout is going to be most important.

TAYLEN COLLINS: Yeah, that was one of the first things that this team noticed walking into the gym was all their National Championship appearances or NCAA Tournament appearances, their National Championships, and it was really cool to see just what this team has accomplished.

Kind of what Hon said, we know this team plays very similar defense to ours, so making sure on our end we're taking care of the ball and just doing everything that we need to do to get this win.

**Q. You both have played in the NCAA Tournament in years prior at previous schools. How do you use that**



**experience to get you ready for the week ahead?**

TAYLEN COLLINS: I would say that just really taking in the experience is something that you kind of have to remember to do. I know playing on a big stage, you can kind of let your nerves get the best of you, but just remembering to leave everything out on the court, playing with no regrets is the main thing.

HONESTY SCOTT-GRAYSON: Yeah, same thing Taylen said. Just taking everything in, and knowing that it's just another game. It's just on a higher stage, a higher level.

NCAA Tournament is something that we really wanted to be. We made that our goal, and now that we're here we have to embrace it and take full advantage of the moment.

**Q. What's your perspective of what the new transfer portal rules have meant, both of you coming from other schools? Do you feel like it gives players a little more power, more voice than they had previously? In terms of being able to form a team quickly, is that something that was important to you guys when you came over knowing that you guys could form something quickly and get to where you wanted to be?**

HONESTY SCOTT-GRAYSON: It's kind of a good question. I entered the transfer portal a long time ago. I didn't really look at it like that. I just was trying to find somewhere where I could be comfortable and fit in.

But as far as the transfer portal, I just feel like it's a place where people need to find their home and just feel comfortable. I feel like it gives opportunity to feel other coaches out and be with other players.

That's really all I have to say about the transfer portal.

TAYLEN COLLINS: I personally love the transfer portal. I just feel like it gives players a way to where they're not feeling stuck because when you're coming out of high school you feel like you have this big decision to make, and it's like you can only make one, and the pressure is on finding the right home for you. If they do choose to go wherever and they're not happy or whatever the



circumstance may be, they do have the opportunity to go play somewhere else if that's what they need to do in order to grow as a player.

I love that it allows players that freedom to where they're not always feeling like they're going to be in a box for the next four years.

**Q. You're going to be on the big stage, and there's going to be a lot of emotion. Y'all are older. You've been here before. How is your leadership style going to be important to this team to keep their emotion in check because y'all are not the most boisterous. Y'all are kind of quiet leaders. Talk about that and how that's going to make a difference.**

TAYLEN COLLINS: Kind of as I mentioned before, I feel like the main thing is making sure everybody remains level headed because it is such a big stage, a big platform that you're put at, especially with these freshmen it being their first time. I feel like what we can do is keep everybody calm, keep the nerves down because I know they're going to be up.

Yeah, just remaining level headed as possible.

HONESTY SCOTT-GRAYSON: I agree. We might even be nervous first couple minutes once tip-off happens. It's up to us to keep our underclassmen under wraps. I feel like we're going to do a good job of that, just making sure everybody is on the same page and everybody gets those jitters out.

**Q. Can you talk about playing in the play-in game, playing earlier than everyone else? Do you think that is an advantage to be able to get out early and not have to think about things for a week, or do you think it's a disadvantage in that if you win, you have one more game than everybody else?**

HONESTY SCOTT-GRAYSON: I feel like it's kind of both but more so an advantage, just to get one game under our belt to get us up and down running. I feel like that will be good for us.

But to turn around and have to play again will probably be our disadvantage.

But I feel like we're going to have the proper recovery to be prepared for that.

TAYLEN COLLINS: I would agree. I think she said it. There's nothing more to really add to that.

**Q. Can you talk about just the reality of what could be**

**the last game of the season; what does that do in terms of pressure on you guys, and do you think that that's something that will affect your play?**

TAYLEN COLLINS: I think that going into the NCAA Tournament, it's always one-and-done. You've got to play every game like it's your last, regardless of whether we're doing a play-in game or whether we're already in the first round. Every game you've got to play like it's your last, so making sure to leave everything out there.

HONESTY SCOTT-GRAYSON: I agree. I agree. I feel like the rest of our team has that mentality, as well. We're all on the same page when it comes to that. We all know that this is a one-and-done type of deal, so we try not to even think about it like that. We just go out there, give it our all, and come out with the win and move on to the next one.

JOHNNIE HARRIS: Just excited to be here. My team have come a long way since the first day, since we brought in nine players that didn't play here last year. They have really grown together and have come a long way. I'm just really excited to see how we come in here and compete in this environment.

**Q. Can you talk a little bit about team building in this new portal era. Is it something you embrace? Is it something that -- we heard a lot of coaches talk in Congress about getting out of the business because it's just not what it used to be yet you are able to come in and build a team and get players that you might want. What are your thoughts about team building in this era?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: You know, I embrace it. You have to embrace it. It's the new way of the world, of our world now. So you have to embrace it and just have to find creative ways to team build.

We start out in the summer having team-building exercises. We do a lot with our staff and our players together. I think that really helps our players come together.

We put them through a lot of adversity. We put them through a lot of team-building stuff. But we also take them and have fun. We go to WNBA games together in the summer. We take them to my house. I'll cook and we'll hang out in the backyard. Just stuff like that. They have dance-offs against our coaches, so it's the team against the coaches. Just little things like that where they have to lean on each other, and they're kind of going against the coaches, so they're competitive.

But like I said, just a lot of stuff like that to help bring them together. The thing about this team is they bonded really, really fast, and we were able to go overseas on a foreign tour, and I think that helped even more.

**Q. You've obviously lost some players to the portal. You've gotten players in the portal. Do you think the portal gives the players a different kind of voice, and does it change the voice you have with the players knowing that if you say something they really don't like or put them in a position they really don't like, they could be gone?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: I do think it gives them a different voice. It doesn't change personally with me, no. I do feel like you can go in and get players that fit your system, but I think you have to be up front and honest about your system, about your expectations.

If a player transfers in, they know what to expect. In some cases that may be a little bit easier.

**Q. Talk about the challenges in facing an Arizona team that's so similar to Auburn's. This will be your third Pac-12 team that Auburn has faced this year. How did the non-conference prep you for the NCAA Tournament?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: You know, obviously the Pac-12 is tough, so playing those teams earlier, we know that we're going to have to bring it.

I do think their team is very similar to us, so we haven't really played a team like this, so that may be a little bit of a challenge, but we've been able to watch some film, and we are very similar.

I really feel like if we come in and do what we do best, we'll have a good chance in this ballgame.

**Q. You've had some good runs in the NCAA Tournament at Mississippi State. This is your first opportunity as a head coach. How will you get your team ready and past the excitement of making the tournament?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think I have two players on my team that have been to the NCAA Tournament. Just having them to understand that everything that we do right now is a special situation. You kind of rev it up in a game when you have a special situation, when you have overtime. Every play is that, so you have to bring it every play. Everybody has to do their job, every play, on both ends of the court.

You coach with a little bit different edge because it's one-and-done now, and you hope they practice that way and they follow your lead. That's kind of what we've been doing. That's kind of how I lean on my experience, and that's what has worked for me and the teams that I've coached.

**Q. If I were to ask you to describe in three words what were the secrets for you getting your team here to the big dance, I already know those three words are going to be defense, defense, defense. Let's just let that count for one word. What would be the other two words that you think best describes why your team was able to make it?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: I would say resilience and toughness. I think to be able to bounce back, maybe after adversity or after a loss, you have to be resilient, and this team has been able to do that because of our leadership.

I think they come together, and they're really hungry. They have to be resilient.

I would say toughness because in order to do that, they have to be tough. In order to come in and when your shot is not falling, to be able to still go out and get stops, that requires toughness. It requires toughness to be selfless, which my team is, to understand your role on the team and everybody else's role on the team and for everybody to do their job. Some of those jobs don't get seen, don't get talked about. But when everybody does their job, the team wins.

I would say those would be the other two.

**Q. Coach, I want to talk about Honesty a little bit. Talk about her recruitment. You went after her in the eighth grade and then missed her, and then obviously she hits the transfer portal. Talk about her recruitment, and did you have to re-recruit her for this last year?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: Yeah, I've been watching Honesty for a long time. She was playing up as an eighth grader. She was a point guard on a really high level Nike elite team. She was doing things that most eighth graders aren't able to do, and it was just natural instinct, and then just watching her grow.

Yes, I recruited her from the eighth grade all the way until she was a senior in high school.

Then when she first hit the transfer portal out of Baylor, we did talk to her a little bit. We didn't have a scholarship available, but we did talk to her a little bit, and I knew that coming out of there that she was a person that was hungry

and that wanted to get back out on the court and fix some things that had went wrong.

I really had a lot of respect for her trying to fix, trying to correct mistakes.

Then when I got to Auburn, I was excited. She was excited. I think her mom was one of the first people to call me. So our relationship has really developed there, having that trust. From the very first day she has said I want to help Auburn get back to the NCAA Tournament.

I really believe that she's worked her butt off to make sure that we were in this position. Coming into this year, she did have a chance to go on to the next level, but she actually came into my office before I could get to her.

Now, she knew I wanted her back, but she came into my office and said, Coach, I want to run it back. She said, I really believe we can be special, and I want to help this team get to the NCAA Tournament.

So really it was just as simple as that. She loves Auburn, and she wanted to see Auburn back where it used to be.

**Q. When you describe the toughness and the resilience of your team, I know a lot of times that comes from within the team and the players, but it's also something that gets instilled in them by the coaches, as well. Take just a second and talk about your current coaching staff and how they've contributed to help get y'all here and to instill those things in your players.**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: I mean, my coaching staff, they have been everything to me. They are just loyal, and when I say they model the behaviors that we try to teach our team every day -- we teach them working hard. They see what they looks like with my coaches. We teach them doing extra. They come in, they sign my door every day, and they see those coaches working, doing extra all the time.

Three of those coaches played for me, three at Mississippi State, one at Texas A&M. They are all champions. They have won at the highest level. That has been really important because now -- they have instant credibility; I've been there, I've done that, I've played at the highest level.

It's hard for these players not to look at them and not listen because you have people that have been there.

Then when you put Alex in, who has been a head coach, and she's just selfless and works hard, and she has embraced our system, and she gets after it.

Then Coach Fred. Coach Fred comes in with a great resume. He's won National Championships in college. He has played for conference championships in the WNBA. Not only can he tell you how to get there, he can help you stick there because he knows what it takes.

I believe our players have a lot of respect for our coaches. It doesn't matter who is on the floor. They have their attention. I'm really grateful for that because that's not -- you don't have that just everywhere. But my coaching staff is amazing.

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