

National Invitation Tournament: Auburn vs Illinois State

Wednesday, April 1, 2026

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

Auburn Tigers

Steve Pearl

Tahaad Pettiford

Elyjah Freeman

Semifinal Pregame Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Joining us is Auburn Head Coach Steven Pearl and players Elyjah Freeman and Tahaad Pettiford. We will start with an opening statement from Coach.

RYAN PEDON: It's obviously an honor to be playing in one of the most historic venues in the history of basketball. You know, our guys walked in and got to see it for the first time, and it was pretty special.

I'm very familiar with Hinkle Fieldhouse, growing up in Evansville, Indiana, for nine years. When I was in Milwaukee, BP came down here and had some unbelievable battles with Butler when they were in the Horizon League.

So really excited to be back. You know, excited to still be playing basketball, playing on a national stage. Proud of our guys taking a really difficult situation and making the most out of it. It's been fun watching them find some joy in playing and hooping and just continuing to compete.

Excited to be here. Excited to still be with these guys. Excited for another great opportunity on Thursday against a really good Illinois State team.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to questions.

Q. Elyjah, you've played all 40 minutes the last two games. How much did you enjoy getting more than a week off? How good do you feel going into this?

ELYJAH FREEMAN: Yeah, just having the time off was good. That little spurt being off, we're ready to play again. Wish we could have started or played earlier. But, yeah, we had the days off, got our legs back, and ready to go.

Q. Tahaad, you guys in this tournament have played some really good defense, especially first halves, early in the second halves. With Illinois State with the way they like to shoot, how key is it going to be to make sure you all get all 40 minutes of really good defense like you all have been playing?

CHASE WALKER: That's pretty much what we've been focusing on. We talked about how good of a team they are on the offensive side and what we need to do to stop them. We know that it was going to take all 40 minutes to beat every team in this tournament. We're just ready to play 40 minutes of defense if that's what we have to do.

Q. You said we've had a week off here to prepare, get our legs back. Illinois State, what's the biggest threat that they pose? What's going to be the most difficult challenge that they present to you guys here this week, a team that certainly you haven't seen this year?

ELYJAH FREEMAN: I would say just them being able to stay in games. Like the past two games that we watched on film, both teams were up, and they just kept battling. So whenever I feel like we get up in this game, we just got to be able to maintain the lead and be able to guard the whole 40 minutes.

CHASE WALKER: Just following up what he said, just fighting the whole 40 minutes. We know that they're a team that's not going to give up. They're a team that likes to battle towards the end of the game. So just try to finish the game strong and how we start.

Q. Tahaad, tournament play, obviously win or go home. Much different than most of the regular season. What can you lean on from your experience in your run in the NCAA Tournament last year getting to the Final Four, if anything, to prepare for this run to be in the semi-finals of the NIT?

CHASE WALKER: One thing I tell my teammates, we didn't come here for no reason. Last year, you know,

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making it to the Final Four, being on that stage, making it to the gym where we wanted to be at and not being able to finish that job, you know, that's something that's on the back of my mind this year. We're in the Final Four here, and my goal is to win it all, so that's what we want to do.

Q. Elyjah, Tahaad just said it there. He said it last weekend that ya'all's goal was to win the whole thing. Now that you're in it, is that kind of the mindset you got coming in knowing that you have two more games left and potentially walk out of here with a trophy?

ELYJAH FREEMAN: Yeah, that's all we've been talking about recently, just coming in here, handling business, and finishing the season off right.

THE MODERATOR: We look forward to seeing you again tomorrow, gentlemen. We'll take questions for Coach.

Q. When you are disappointed on Selection Sunday, how tough is it and challenging is it to get a team focused and to make this kind of run? The second part of that, as a basketball guy, what's your feel for what it's like this week to be the way they've done it where they have everybody in the same town here?

RYAN PEDON: Yeah, for anybody that's right there on the bubble, it's a really -- it's really difficult to be able to shift your focus from the opportunity and the excitement of potentially playing in the NCAA Tournament to having to make a decision on what we're going to do next.

You know, when I told the guys of our intention to play in the NIT, just being totally transparent, it was difficult, because all year our sights have been set on making the tournament and trying to make a run.

Like I said, when everything happened, I'm here to coach basketball, and those guys are here to play basketball. An opportunity -- here's the thing, an opportunity to compete on ESPN three more times at home, right, if you are able to advance, but an opportunity to compete on ESPN and Hinkle Fieldhouse and potentially Gainbridge Fieldhouse if you are able to win that game, 99% of basketball players would die for that opportunity.

It's not our goal. Our goal is obviously to make the NCAA Tournament, advance, like we've done over these past seven or eight years, but I just thought that it was an opportunity to get valuable reps for our players, for guys that want to come back, for guys that could potentially transfer, and for guys that could make it to the next level. Opportunity to go out there and get more good film and just continue to build on the things that we've been building on all year long.

Proud of the guys. Obviously the first half is South Alabama. People may have been looking and being, like, what the hell are they doing? Our guys did a great job of just locking in at that point. I thought we've played with purpose. They've found some joy in playing the game, which has been really, really cool to see, and they're locked in and engaged.

Obviously we're excited to be here, and we're excited to be able to compete against another really good team in Illinois State on Thursday.

Then as far as all four championships being in the same city, it's brilliant. Like, I know the NIT is probably going to be in Indy moving forward. I think it makes a lot of sense for the NIT to be where the Final Four is every year. I really do. I think that would incentivize more teams at our level to play in the NIT.

Obviously being able to play in Hinkle Fieldhouse is a ton of incentive, but I just think being a part of this weekend with our guys made them a little more excited about it. Obviously it's not the one that we want to be in, but there's still a vibe in the city, and there's still a level of excitement in the city that our guys get to play in front of.

This state loves and understands and respects basketball more than most. It's going to be a really cool atmosphere for our guys to be able to play in. I know they're excited about it.

Q. We've talked about how much getting these extra games and reps have meant for some of these young guys. I wanted to ask you about Sway and Filip because they've had to play all the five minutes with Murph out. How big have you seen them be able to kind of grow, because it's a position that they played somewhat this season, but didn't have to carry as much of a load as they've had.

RYAN PEDON: Neither one of those guys are actually five men. They're both -- Filip is say four man, and Sebastian is, like, a three/four. They've had to play out of position all year just due to injuries and just how the roster has been put together.

Filip obviously has really taken advantage of his minutes and his increased role. He's obviously played really well. Sebastian has had to play three, four, and five all year, so just having to learn that position and playing against a couple of really good inside guys, and obviously Chase is going to be another handful on Thursday.

Our guys have had the opportunity to go against some

pretty good bigs and have had to really step up and carry the load. You know, for the most part, we've done a pretty good job of stepping up and answering the bell.

For those guys specifically, both of them being freshman, we're one of the youngest teams -- especially now without Murph, we're one of the youngest teams in college basketball, and our two guys playing five are both freshmen, and they've had to step up and have done so in a big way. We need them to continue to do so if we want to advance.

Q. Just in general, what has made Illinois State so effective in this tournament to go and beat Wake Forest on the road, and they handled Dayton pretty much wire to wire? What makes them as good as they are and how they've gotten to this point where the rest of the teams in the semis are all 1 seeds, but they're the 3 seed that's in.

RYAN PEDON: Yeah, they finished the season strong. The Northern Iowa game was a little bit of an anomaly, because I felt like Northern Iowa played exceptionally well, and I thought Illinois State missed a bunch of shots that they typically make, and that got away from them.

For them to make it in the NIT and start off with a really strong home performance. Then they have two best wins out of anyone that's here right now with wins at Wake Forest and wins at Dayton. I wish I could say that those teams just weren't excited to play them, but that's not the case.

Wake Forest was flying around and looked like they were playing with -- Coach Forbes had those guys playing hard and with purpose, and it looked like they were excited to be there. Illinois State just hung in there and got down nine in the second half and just made a couple of really tough shots and just made plays late in that game and, ultimately, were able to come in there and get a win.

They go to Dayton in a sold-out home environment, one of the toughest places to play in college basketball. They get up, like, 19, and they're up 13-0 to start the game. Threw the first punch and the second punch and just kept going. They were able to hang in there late.

Two really impressive wins. I think it's just if you look at since the tournament and since postseason play started, I think they're the fifth ranked defense in all the country. That's counting all the teams playing in the NCAA Tournament right now. That's significant.

They make multiple efforts. They play hard. They do a great job of guarding you all the way to the rim without

fouling and just contesting shots. They're not a great shot-blocking team, but they do a great job of making multiple efforts and finishing out possession. They do a great job of limiting you to one shot.

Then offensively they run a lot of really unique, good actions to be able to put their players in positions to be successful. They have four guys that shoot 40% or better from three. Then Chase obviously is just a load down there on the inside.

So they're multi-dimensional. They have a lot of guys that can make plays, and they have good depth. You know, they have done a phenomenal job this year. It's been fun to kind of watch them leading up to this game.

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