

National Invitation Tournament: Auburn vs Illinois State

Thursday, April 2, 2026

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Hinkle Fieldhouse

Auburn Tigers

Steven Pearl

Keyshawn Hall

Tahaad Pettiford

Semifinal Postgame Press Conference

Auburn 88, Illinois State 66

STEVEN PEARL: Good performance by our guys. Really cool to have the opportunity to play in Hinkle. You know, they had a tremendous turnout from their fans, and I thought that gave our guys a little extra juice in the building, playing in a road environment almost.

And, you know, they came out and threw the first punch and it helps obviously when guys are knocking down shots early. We got into a bit of a rhythm and we did a good job, early, I thought, of forcing them into turnovers, and we did a great job in the first half of converting those into points.

Last 30 minutes I thought our defense was really solid. We made some mistakes early in the game that allowed them to get some threes up and I thought as the game went on we did a better job. Did a good job in the post. Forced them into 18 turnovers.

Good overall effort. Proud of the guys. Thought they really stepped up tonight. Made, unselfishly, 20 assists. That's something that, you know, whether we share the ball, we're pretty good.

So proud of the guy. Proud of the two guys up here for really stepping up in a big environment and finding a way to get another win.

Q. Like SP said, what's the key to making the shift and getting the stops and running away with this game?

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: We knew the team that we were playing, they knew that they love being down in those type of situations. They thrive being down in the second half. So we knew we had to keep our foot on the gas and just



couldn't give up because we knew any chance, any part of the game, they can just make a run and come back.

Q. You seemed to be in rhythm, particularly first half of the game. What were you seeing defensively a la you had you to get off to that good start.

KEYSHAWN HALL: I don't know. I was just hooping. I was just in the flow just playing basketball, my teammates just finding me. We were getting a lot of fastbreak points. That opened everything up, playing some defense and getting out in transition. When we do that, that's a recipe for good, you know what I'm saying. I was just out there flowing.

Q. What about your offense just made it so easy to score points throughout the night, especially in that first half and that first stint, as well the second half?

KEYSHAWN HALL: I mean, like I said, defense, it was carrying us for real. Like especially when we getting out in transition, then a lot of guys hitting shots. So they double-teamed. We just getting off the ball fast. Then we were all just flowing, just smiling, happy, just playing. So I think that was another thing.

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Like he said, just getting out in transition. Letting our defense turn into our offense. We prepped for their defense. We knew what were going to come out and do. Just running our offense, running our sets and knowing we can get any bucket we want at any point.

Q. You won the points-off-turnovers battle, 26-9. How important was that to getting the win?

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Very. That right there separated us from them and made offense for us easier. We knew if we get a stop on defense, we can just slow their game down and turn it into our game.

Q. A thousand points. What was that feeling like, especially that you get to play some extra games here

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down the stretch and to get to that mark here at Auburn?

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Feels good. Honestly I didn't know I got it until after the game. You know it was something I was looking forward to getting. I'm happy but we still got more, another game to play, so I'm looking forward to that.

Q. You talked about how important this was with last year, how it ended. What's the feel that you're having right now going into this championship game?

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Just to finish what we came here for. We came to win it all, and that's what we're looking forward to doing. Just got to get back and get ready for Sunday.

Q. This means that for another three days you're going to be a part of the buzz around here and you're also going to be one of the last four teams playing this season. Can you talk about just how much you're looking forward to being part of that scenario?

KEYSHAWN HALL: It's great, you know what I'm saying. It's going to be a lot of fun, a lot of people down here enjoying time, you know what I'm saying. It's going to be fun. Just have to stay locked in and finish off. Like were Coach SP said, this is a basketball state, so a lot of people come out and show love regardless of any game. We've got to just really accept and just have fun.

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: What he said; it's special to be one of the last teams playing. You know, not every team can finish their season with a win. Hopefully we can just do that and end the season happily.

Q. Just the front court effort tonight, doing their job against Chase Walker, what was the message pregame with that?

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, we talked about, we've been doing a lot of switches and every time we had an opportunity to switch it was all about full fronting the post and just really trying to make his catches difficult. And I thought we did a good job with our ball pressure on the entry pass.

And then I thought our guards and even our bigs did a really good job fronting the post and making his touches really difficult. He's such a big piece of what they do offensively and, you saw every time they got the ball into the post, a lot good of things happened, whether he scored it, when he got an assist or whether he got the offensive rebound.

We did a good job limiting his touches, and I thought when he did catch it we did a good job with our activity. He had four turnovers in the game. So I thought we were, you know, we bothered him with our ball pressure. We bothered him with our doubling, and I thought our guys did a really good job.

We got him into some trouble, which obviously hindered his minutes, and ultimately allowed us to come through and win the game.

Q. Everybody at home is asking me to ask you about the jacket and the hood. We've talked about how since you've made the switch it's been a good luck charm for you, the hood, and also just the luck that's gone with the jackets this year.

STEVEN PEARL: I guess it's fashion, I don't know. That's not what I was told. There is the Pump Party tonight. So maybe I could have snuck out of here and this is a little more casual.

No, I mean, just switching it up. I was doing it for senior night because Keyshawn Hall asked me to dress up for Senior Night, and you know, decided to keep it going. And I think we're 6-2 since the jacket's been available. It's an expensive good luck charm.

But you know, if it helps us win, you know, keep doing it.

Q. Talk about Elyjah Freeman, the athleticism that he showed tonight, blocked shots, steals, he was in the passing lane, and do you know what his status is? I know he was held out a little bit in the half.

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, Elyjah does some things. Early in the first half, I think we missed a layup and he comes out of nowhere where and gets a tip dunk. Didn't even see him on that play.

We had a couple coverage mistakes and he just is -- you know, down it to go block a shot. You know, gets crazy rebounds. Like he's got the speed and the athleticism and the explosiveness to do things that a lot of people can't do.

So did a great job with his activity. Obviously had three steals, two assists, no turnovers. He wasn't forcing his offense because his teammates were flowing, which is why he's a winner because he's just so unselfish and he's not going to force the issue to try to get his numbers up.

He's just going to, you know, be aggressive when we need him to be aggressive, and just really happy with his progression as the year's gone on. I feel like he's just

playing with a lot more freedom and not thinking as much.

You know, I've got to talk to Clark. He said something about tendonitis. So I've got to talk with Clark and see what happened with his knee, but I think it more out of an abundance of caution to see if he was okay.

Q. You guys finished the regular season at 2-8 but have now gone on this run. As a coach trying to build this program into your own, how rewarding has it been to go on this run and have a chance to play for the Championship on Sunday?

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, we play in the best league, the deepest league in college basketball. And it's a grind, man. It just is.

And if you look at a lot of those losses, they were one- or two-possession games down the stretch and we just weren't able to finish,

But, you know, our league play got us ready for being able to play in this tournament and has allowed us to find a way to win four straight.

So you know, I'm proud of my guys. I've said it a million times. We took a really difficult situation not getting in on Selection Sunday, and I think we've turned it into a positive. They are playing with a level of joy that is really good for me as a coach to see. Guys that, you know, obviously that can come back.

It's great to see what they may be showing me next year. You know, guys like Sebastian Williams, coming down and knocked down three threes. Filip is continuing to get better each and every day. Tahaad, K-Mag, those guys have really stepped up in their roles as the postseason has gone on. Really, just proud of them because it's just an opportunity to represent themselves but also represent Auburn, and they have done a really good job of that.

Q. 20 assists is a lot for any offense, but especially for you guys and the way y'all have played offense this year. What was the key into that, attacking that defense the way y'all did?

STEVEN PEARL: I think we have done a good job all postseason of really sharing it. You know, they do a really good job of loading in the gas but I think a lot of it came in transition, too. Every time we got a steal, we did a great job, we can do a couple more. Every time we got a steal in transition we threw ahead and made a simple pass, as opposed to dribble, dribble right and make turning it over.

I thought we did a great job of getting off of it, making easy

passes and then finishing around the rim. The halfcourt I thought for the most part we were pretty solid, make being inside-out passes and helping one another. Obviously it helps when guys knock down shots making 12 threes. Sebastian and KO combined for eight for eight from three, and you know when you do that, obviously your statistics are going to go up but it was great to see the guys looking for one another.

Q. About the strength shooting, Kevin Overton was 5-for-5 from downtown. How important is it going to be for you guys to try to retain him next year?

STEVEN PEARL: I mean, how many threes has he made in the NIT? A lot. Yeah, I mean, pretty important. You know, he's having his best offensive year of his career, and you know, obviously KO is going to be a really important piece coming back next year. So we'd love to have him, and you know, he loves Auburn. Just like a lot of these guys do, and you know, excited to see them have an Auburn uniform on again next year.

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