

National Invitation Tournament: Tulsa vs Auburn

Friday, April 3, 2026
Indianapolis, Indiana, USA
Hinkle Fieldhouse

Auburn Tigers

Steven Pearl

Elyjah Freeman

Kevin Overton

Tahaad Pettiford

Keyshawn Hall

Final Pregame Press Conference



playing in that, trying to take one game at a time, obviously understanding you can't lose but it's just about details and executing at this point.

Q. Looking at Tulsa, they are built like an SEC team. How can you get your guys to play one more complete game of basketball Sunday?

STEVEN PEARL: Our guys have done a really good job of respecting our opponents up to this point, and it's shown the last couple games. And Tulsa is going to be no different. Phenomenal three-point shooting team. They have multiple guys that can get it going, and they have four guys that can average double figures; and it can be a different guy every night.

As a team, they shoot close to 40 percent from three, and that's something that's been a struggle of ours and something we're going to have to look into. After the first five or seven minutes, we did a better job of executing the game plan defensively and taking away some of the things that Illinois State did really well. But it's going to require that and more against this team.

They have a bunch of guys that can really spread it, can attack it, they do a great job clashing the offensive glass and they have beaten a couple really good teams so far in the NIT Championship. When we get back, we are going to watch film on them for the first time and our guys will see what they are up against. This is a team that they finished somewhere around where we did in our league, and they had a great year this year. They are one of, like, 11 teams with 30 wins this year and that's significant. They have done an unbelievable job, Coach Konkol has done an unbelievable job getting that thing turned around in his fourth season. Impressed with what they have done and it's going to be a great matchup.

Q. Tahaad, obviously the season has not gone as you guys hoped for, but how does it feel to have a chance to end it with some hardware?

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Feels good. Trying to be one of

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, obviously happy to still be playing basketball. Happy to be a part of the NIT Championship. An opportunity to play for a championship, an opportunity to be one of three teams to first name the season out with a win. So guys played really well last night. Shot the ball really well, and you know, just going to try and continue to carry that momentum against a really good Tulsa team who presents a lot of challenges but we are obviously excited about the opportunity.

Q. Elyjah, how are you feeling today? I know you had to leave the game early and how big was it yesterday, the defense that y'all played from beginning and the calls with the turnovers, how good was it to have a full game like that?

ELYJAH FREEMAN: I'm feeling better. I got to see Clark, our athletic trainer. Us being able to force turnovers the whole game and run the floor was something we talked about on film and hopefully we can continue on Sunday.

Q. Kevin, this is for you. You've had the postseason experience more than some of these other guys out here. How different is this NIT Championship experience than what you've had previously and what have you been trying to impart to them about trying to finish strong here?

KEVIN OVERTON: I think the mindset is the same going into the postseason. I think I've been in a lot of different situations. These guys have, too. But it's the same approach as playing in March Madness, if we were to be



the few teams that ends the season with a win and two out strong. Doesn't matter if we are playing NIT Championship or March Madness. We are here to win it all, so that's the goal.

Q. Keyshawn, pretty much everybody else on this team has eligibility left but this is your last ride. What has it meant to get all these games down the stretch, keep winning and have a chance to finish your career college or a high note?

KEYSHAWN HALL: It means a lot, you know what I'm saying. I enjoy playing with these guys and this program. I've been having fun and just enjoying it. I haven't even thought about it's going to be my last game. I've just been enjoying and having fun. It would be great to win one more game and win a championship, regardless, however it goes.

Q. The defense yesterday, that was something y'all have been harping on. They knew it's going to take 40 minutes of really good defense to win this tournament. Is that the mindset tomorrow, especially with the way Tulsa likes to shoot?

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, absolutely. I think our guys, the last three games, especially, through the first 30 minutes ever the game, I thought our guys have really been locked in and have flown around. They turned the ball over 18 times yesterday.

I thought our activity it was really good. Every guy up here made a lot of plays on the defensive end and this will probably be the best offensive team we have played up to this point in the tournament.

Yeah, we just really have to lock in on the details of the scouting report. Our guys have to be in the stands for 40 minutes on this one because the second you stand up, Popoola comes up for a three, Barnestable comes up and hits a three. They have two guys that have made over a hundred threes this year, and they have four guys that are shooting well over 40 percent with 50-plus makes this year.

They are going to present their challenges but our guys have to continue to stay locked in to what we are doing, stay connected, and if we are able to do that, obviously our chances of winning will go up.

Q. You've been a bit of an ironman so far during the NIT Championship. Other than the last game, you played every single minute of the first couple of games. Are you in that mindset of if it's going to take 40 more minutes you're going to be locked in for that for this one?

ELYJAH FREEMAN: Yeah, of course. I'll just go out and play and just do anything I can for the guys.

Q. Kevin, 17 points per game on 48 percent shooting in the NIT Championship. What have you seen on the offensive side to score at an efficient rate?

KEVIN OVERTON: Really the same all season. Just trying to keep my same approach. I think I had a turning point going through the second half of the season of just my confidence and me approaching games. There was a specific game I think that kind of helped me take another step, and from there on, it was just keeping that same approach.

And then going into the postseason, understanding that right now is a time that you have to play your best and approach the game the right way, and that's just what I'm trying to do.

Q. Keyshawn and Kevin, what was it about Hinkle last night and the environment? You guys shot the ball so well, you two in particular, but your team nearly 60 percent. What was working specifically for you guys?

KEYSHAWN HALL: I really can't call it. I just know it felt like a great atmosphere. Happy to be there. Felt like a road environment. I feel like when you play road environments, you turn it up a notch and the defensive activity, like got us hyped for each other.

So when somebody started making shots and we getting steals and things like that, we all just flowing and having fun, you know what I'm saying. I think that's what it was.

KEVIN OVERTON: Yeah, I would just say, repeat all that.

Q. Another five-assist game for you last night. Just talk a little bit about your all-around game. Everyone knows what kind of scorer you've been through your career at Auburn. Talk about that assist game that has really emerged for you, basically, the last third of the season.

TAHAAD PETTIFORD: Playing with these type of guys makes it a lot easier for me knowing that if I give up the ball, they can make something happen. Knowing I have those kind of teammates where I can get off the ball and they are going to make something happen for us or if I'm open, they are going to find they. That's the type of chemistry we have.

Q. Coach peril, have you already decided what the fashion choice is going to be for Sunday for this one?



STEVEN PEARL: This jacket's really caused a buzz around Twitter. So you've got to call Doug at Circa in Auburn if you want to ask about the jacket I wore last night. I have a few options for the next one. It's kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing or whatever my wife tells me she likes the most. We'll see what Sunday brings and what kind of mood I'm in Sunday night.

Q. Coach, with one more game on the schedule, what would you say is the biggest lesson you learned in your first year as a head coach?

STEVEN PEARL: I don't think you guys have enough time to go through the amount of lessons I've learned in my first year.

No, I mean, I think it's something that I'll probably back and reflect on once the season is over. There's so many things that kind of come to mind. For me, those, I'm thankful for the guys to my right. You know, they were put in an incredibly difficult situation this year, coming in with only one returner, ten new guy, nine underclassmen. And then having to deal with me as a first-year head coach, playing one of the toughest strength of schedules in all of college basketball in the deepest league in the country, and going through some tremendous highs and some very difficult lows.

And then obviously to not be in the tournament and, you know, to be put in a position where we've got to play the NIT Championship, and to their credit, you know, these young men have taken full advantage of that opportunity, and honestly, they have made -- I'm proud of them.

I know their families are proud of them but I think their university is really proud of them as well, and they have made people proud of this university.

The biggest thing for me is just young men want to be coached, want to be held accountable, want to be held to a high standard and that's what keeps us going in this profession is, you know, being able to sit next to young men like the ones to my right.

So, incredibly proud of them and everything they have gone through this year.

Q. Coach, the NIT Championship has been a bit tumultuous in the past with teams declining their invitations. What factors went into you guys accepting the invite and playing out the rest of your season?

STEVEN PEARL: Yeah, I mean, I'm here to coach basketball, and these guys are here to play. And you

know, while it was a difficult decision, I really hope that the decision that we made to play in this tournament will show teams that are in our position moving forward that this is a great opportunity to really change the narrative of your season. For multiple reasons.

We have young men up here that are fighting to find their way into the NBA Draft. Keyshawn Hall is a guy that better get looked at in the second round of the NBA Draft this year. If I'm an agent and I have a really good player, I'm putting a player in a workout with that guy, I'm not, I'm just telling you, and you saw it last night.

If you look at Elijah, Tahaad and KO, all guys that have opportunities to come back next year, they are giving me an opportunity to see what I'm going to be able to bring back next year, if I'm able to retain those guys.

But also they are getting great film of themselves out there so that had they do go play at the next level, people are going to sit here and look at us and go, right, they are going to lay an egg. They are not going to be excited about playing.

What a tremendous opportunity to come out here and change that narrative and prove people wrong and just people regardless of the stage, regardless of the tournament, I'm out here to hoop and I'm out here to have fun. That's what these guys have done.

For me, I'm incredibly proud of those guys but also, I think this is something moving forward that I think a lot of teams can look at and say, listen, Auburn did it the right way. They didn't quit. They kept fighting and they ended their season on a high note. I think that's something moving forward a lot of teams should look at to build some positive momentum, not just for their team but for their individuals moving forward.

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