

NCAA Men's Regional Semifinals and Finals: Kansas City

Sunday, March 31, 2019
Kansas City, Missouri



Bruce Pearl
Bryce Brown
Jared Harper
Samir Doughty
Auburn Tigers

Auburn - 77 Kentucky - 71

THE MODERATOR: Auburn Tigers heading to the Final Four are with us. Samir Doughty, Jared Harper, and Bryce Brown represent the student body. Head coach Bruce Pearl is here as well. We'll ask him to start off on a statement on this game and go to questions for all four gentlemen from Auburn.

Bruce, please.

BRUCE PEARL: Could I ask one favor? Could you say the very first part of what you said when you introduced us? Do you remember what it was?

THE MODERATOR: The Auburn Tigers going to the Final Four are with us.

BRUCE PEARL: Thank you, sir.

THE MODERATOR: Sounds good, doesn't it?

BRUCE PEARL: Sounds great. Just thank God for the blessings. And I'm not sure that -- we thought this was going to happen. I knew this group wanted to make history. I knew they wanted to play good basketball, and I knew they wanted to represent Auburn, the other student-athletes on our campus that can be for championships.

And to do this in such an impressive way against the best teams and coaches in college basketball makes it even more rewarding.

But we understand that we've got two more games to play in order to win a championship, and we're going to try to continue to focus on that.

Q. Coach, you just said that you beat some of the

best teams. The three winningest teams in college basketball history. Can you talk about that run, and then I have a follow-up for you.

BRUCE PEARL: Just humbled and blessed. It's an honor to even be on the floor with those programs, and then when you play -- your kids play hard and play unselfishly and play together, obviously they're the Cinderellas of this tournament. And that's what makes March so special, which team is it going to be?

Now, this is important: At Auburn in athletics, we're not Cinderellas in anything. We're really, really good in all those other sports. We win championships. Been a long time since men's basketball has been good. That what makes it so special for us.

Q. Do you know who is fourth all time in wins?

BRUCE PEARL: Fourth?

Q. You might get to play them. It's Duke.

BRUCE PEARL: Really?

Q. Thoughts on playing them, maybe?

BRUCE PEARL: My thoughts are playing Virginia first and Coach Bennett. His dad was a great coach in the state of Wisconsin even before he was at the university in Madison.

So, got great history and respect. Coach Bennett's sister was a head women's coach at Evansville, and we became friends when I was at Southern Indiana. So you talk about a great family, the Bennett family, and what he's done at Virginia, it will be a real change for sure.

Q. What adjustments did you have to make not just scheme-wise but personnel-wise without Chuma? And I'll have a follow-up as well.

BRUCE PEARL: These guys will tell you that there's no question we missed Chuma because you can't replace him. He's our most valuable player. He's kind of our go-to guy other, then Jared or Bryce.

But they've got confidence in Anfernee, Austin, Danjel, and Horace. They do. They're different. And so I think that confidence going in, our guys didn't think we can't win without him, we may miss him, but the other guys would step up. The second thing and real key were probably these three guys sitting up here. Our second

half defense to start the second half was tremendous. Incredible ball pressure forced Kentucky out a way. We didn't turn them over as much, but we were aggressive without fouling.

Samir Doughty locked up one of the best offensive players in this tournament in Tyler Herro. I mean, he just took it on himself to make sure that he wasn't going to get great looks and that then made them go to Washington almost exclusively when Samir just locked his assignment up.

Q. You mentioned yesterday, you said there's no way we're going to get 97 points against Kentucky. Still only seven 3s. Did you feel like you had a good chance to win this game if you hit only seven 3s?

BRUCE PEARL: We don't look at it that way. You have to take what the defense gives you, because Kentucky was switching and putting so much pressure on the perimeter. We were able to get Jared downhill. Bryce made some huge plays. They took the 3 ball away, so Bryce went to his old school pullup game. He didn't think he had it, but he got in the lane, rose up, and them suckers were beautiful, great basketball.

Listen, for me, in the second half, all I did was get -- try to get out of the way, get the ball to Jared or Bryce. Bryce should have got the ball to Jared at the end of regulation, because I can't tell you how many days in practice we work with like 15 seconds left in the game. We try to get the ball to Bryce when Jared is begging for it and try to get Horace open on the wing and see if we can get Horace a look at the buzzer from 3. We work on it everyday. Not. (Laughter)

BRYCE BROWN: I thought he was going to pass it back. Hey.

BRUCE PEARL: Welcome to my world, right?

Q. Jared and Bryce, kind of going back to what coach said about taking away the 3. It also seemed like when the 3s weren't falling, that you took it upon yourselves to be able to drive and attack the rim. In what ways do you feel like y'all were executing on the floor to be able to take those high percentage shots?

JARED HARPER: I just think as a team we just looked to make the right plays at all times, whether or not it's a 3 or a mid-ranger, trying to get to the basket. Kentucky was -- I feel like they were trying to limit our 3 ball tonight, and Kentucky is not a team that usually helps off the wings. We had to drive and get downhill. Make tough 2s and continue to play our game.

BRYCE BROWN: Yeah. Same. Same thing what

Jared said. Took what the defense gave me. I tried to mix in and find my -- when I try to drive, I seen that defense wasn't stepping up, so I tried to stop on a dime, pull up for my mid-range shot, because they were running me off the 3-point line as well. That looked to be one of the only shots I was able to get late in the second half. I just continued to do -- I continued to do what the defense gave me.

Q. Jared, no one played bigger in overtime the final five minutes. What was going through your mind at the start of the last five minutes of the game?

JARED HARPER: I want to just say just me, I feel like our team played well the whole second half, the whole overtime. I can't do what I did without having the support of my teammates and coaches.

So, it's just -- I was able to make those plays because of plays like Samir was making late in the game going and grabbing those 50/50 balls, those rebounds in, how Bryce was playing offensively late in the second half. That gives me confidence going into overtime to be able to make those plays because I have the same confidence in them to make plays.

Q. Bruce, Bryce and Jared combined for 23 of your 30 points in the second half. That's something you probably have seen before, but this was as big a stage as they've done it with.

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah. You know, Dick, Jared Harper is not on the Bob Cousy watch list. He just isn't. The question would be why? He's one of the best -- Second Team All Conference in the SEC last year. I don't think there was anybody talking in the preseason about the fact that this was one of the better backcourts in college basketball. The question is why not? Because they truly are. They have been all season long.

The thing I love about them is they are self-made guys. They both work as hard as anybody. Their best coaches are their fathers, okay? I help. Pat Harper and Cedric Brown are the two best coaches these guys have. Those dads are both in my gym all the time and we all -- we all have our roles. I have a job to do in coaching them, but it's just the truth.

So, but they'll tell you the best thing about our team this year in March, they haven't had to carry us every game. Haven't had to carry us every game. We've won some games when they didn't play well. That was never the case before March 1st.

Q. I have a question for you, Bruce. When the team came out in the second half, the energy just seemed different, much more electric. What was the conversation at that point in the game?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, we got Jared. We got Chuma Okeke, and we got Bryce Brown shooting up the 3 balls.

These guys trust each other. I think one of the messages -- guys got to trust each other. I really think that Samir picked us up defensively with his energy and then Bryce at the end of the first half, Bryce started pressure up on Ashton.

We know Ashton really well because we recruited him for four years, and we love Ashton. He came on campus, and if he wasn't at Kentucky, he might have come to Auburn.

But at some point Bryce Brown as a senior had to put pressure on Ashton and not let him get to spots on the floor. Our guys saw that in the halftime locker room. Samir came in at halftime said, "Guys, we're going to win this game with our defense."

The other thing I talked to them about before the game, Kentucky had been giving up 53 points a game prior to this in the tournament. We've been averaging 88. Sometimes our individual games get defined by our individual offense, like when Bryce is making shots sometimes he's engaged defensively.

I told him going in, "Listen, your individual offense very well may not be there. We're not going to put up big numbers most likely. Don't let that affect the way we need to win the game."

I said it. He lived it. The fact that Samir lived it, I think gave the rest of those guys the direction they needed.

Q. Question for the players. I don't know if any of you saw it, but Danjel said he commented on an Instagram post, making light of Chuma's situation. He used it as motivation. Curious if you guys showed it as well? If he showed it in the locker room, how it motivated you?

SAMIR DOUGHTY: I don't even know what y'all are talking about. I'm really not too sure.

BRYCE BROWN: Showing him in the wheelchair.

SAMIR DOUGHTY: I seen that this morning. I think that's just disrespect and slap in the face. I'm so glad we came out and battled the whole entire 40 minutes for him. I know he's happy. I know he's proud of us, because if he was out there, you know, he would have made a huge difference as well.

I'm just glad that we probably shut that up now because I didn't like that at all and definitely use it as motivation.

Q. When did Chuma show up, and did he talk to anybody or how -- could you walk us through what happened there.

BRUCE PEARL: I can tell you, I was in his room before the bus pulled out and we left it up to Chuma as to whether or not he wanted to come to the game.

I thought he made a really good decision. It was his choice not to come. He's in some pain. He's going to have surgery Tuesday and we're flying home tonight. The flying home tonight is going to be a lot for him to physically go through. So moving him to the gym, sitting him by the bench, I just -- he was comfortable with that because he's a pro. He doesn't want the camera on him.

He must have been watching in the first half. Did any of you guys ask him? Maybe they'll know. He had to be watching in the first half at the hotel and said, "I can't stay here. I got to go."

Did any of you guys talk to him about why he showed up?

BRYCE BROWN: I asked him before the game if he was going to come. Emotionally, he said I'm in too much pain to come.

SAMIR DOUGHTY: That's what he said, too. That goes to show how great of a teammate he is, honestly, for him to show up, knowing how much pain he was in.

Q. For Bryce and Jared, can you describe the shift in your mindset after that loss to Kentucky in Lexington?

And Bruce, do you think that your team goes this far if he didn't have that loss and your talk with them about closing the gap on a team like Kentucky after that game?

JARED HARPER: I just think -- I think we played Arkansas the game before that. We played well against Arkansas, went into Kentucky thinking we were going to be able to win a game. I think we were playing well at that time. We felt that was our next push to be able to play. We ended up getting embarrassed that game, but coach came in the locker room after the game, said let's not let this tournament define two, three, four games. We tried to put that game behind us as fast as possible, learn as much as we could from it, and move forward.

BRYCE BROWN: I kind of just tried to put that game behind me as quick as possible. Personally I didn't play well. Let the game come to me a little bit. I already knew we were going to bounce back from that

pretty well because of the players we got and the locker room we have, I just knew we were going to be able to bounce back from that. I just put that one behind us and just tried to win a few more.

BRUCE PEARL: The thing about that game, Kentucky played great. We actually went -- we had dinner the night before with athletic director, Allen Greene.

THE WITNESS: I told Allen, I said I think we have a chance tomorrow in Rupp. You don't usually say that to your AD because he might expect you to do it. I was being honest with him. He was at the game and he obviously, "Boy, was coach off on that one."

But, I came back to the kids and said here is all we've done. We missed an opportunity. Do you know how rare it is to bring a team to Rupp and have a chance to win? We missed an opportunity. Now, let's just not miss the next one. We got to go to Georgia and we got to win out here if we're going to get a good seed and have a chance to advance in a tournament.

We won out, we got a 5 seed, and we're going to the Final Four.

Q. Bruce, end of the game you're at the podium, Chuma is down there. You said Chuma, "This one is for you. The next two are for Auburn. "Can you kind of relive that for us?"

BRUCE PEARL: Well, you know, I'm not -- I've got in trouble with my mouth before so why not do it on a national stage? These guys will back me up, though.

I do believe in them, even though I'm on them pretty hard. Wanted to just recognize Chuma because these guys definitely did want to try to get this for him because the injury is so fresh. You immediately think about all the kids back home, all athletes back home right now that are just fired up and the coaches and their classmates. What an uplifting thing. The next couple, if we can get them, would be for Auburn.

I want to make one more statement on this. This I think is important: We are not tired. The only two guys that have an excuse to be tired would be Bryce and Jared. They've played pretty heavy minutes all year long. The rest of us haven't. If you look at that stat sheet, I think it's nine guys that played double-digit minutes. That's trust. Dr. Tom Davis taught me that. You don't short your bench in the playoffs or in tournament time. You trust the rest of those guys. We played our rotations. We played -- got to trust them.

THE MODERATOR: We have two minutes left. One question right here on the aisle. Go.

Q. So I wanted to ask about the strength of the SEC

and now that there's two of you playing in this game that you win and a team in the Final Four, what does that say about the conference and just the strength of from it top to bottom?

BRUCE PEARL: I think these guys feel prepared. We went up against great teams. Tennessee, Kentucky and LSU were the three best teams in our league this year. We started playing great basketball in March and won our tournament championship. So therefore, there's a responsibility to represent the SEC as its tournament champion and automatic qualifier.

So it matters to these guys to represent the SEC. The quality of the game is better in the league. We were certainly prepared. When -- the only ones -- New Mexico State, Kansas, and North Carolina, the teams we had to play to get here were good and well coached, also.

THE MODERATOR: We have final question for the student-athletes and the head coach who are going to the Final Four. Go (laughter).

Q. This is for Bryce and Jared. So basketball players live their whole lives dreaming of this moment. How do you guys feel now that you're going to the Final Four?

BRYCE BROWN: You say -- like you say it's something you dream of. It's unreal. It's very, very emotional. I feel like this whole game we really wanted to do this for Chuma and the Auburn family. They supported us so much, but just goes back to I feel like trusting each other and just doing what we needed to do to win the game.

JARED HARPER: I think this goes to a whole team effort. Coming into the season, our goals were to go to the Final Four and be able to compete for a national championship.

I think our whole work this whole summer and the preseason and during the whole season was for this exact moment right here for what we want to do as a team and how we want to build on our legacy as a team.

I know I can't do it without any of my teammates, and I know we are all going to be prepared and ready to go, compete for a national championship.

BRYCE BROWN: One more thing. No matter how low we got this season, no matter how much adversity went through, we always believed this is where we could get to. I feel like that was big, you know, just the guys in the locker room, we always believed and we also lived for this moment, I feel like.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much. That's a wrap. Congratulations.

BRUCE PEARL: Thank you.