

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: First Round - Auburn vs Iowa

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Legacy Arena

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Fran McCaffery

Media Conference

Q. Coach, good to see you again.

COACH McCAFFERY: Good to see you.

Q. One win away from 20 wins once again five, six, seven years in a row. Talk about this team and the uniqueness of this group of guys.

COACH McCAFFERY: I think, Bob, coming into the season, we thought we could be a good team. But, you know, we lost a lot from last year, he was the 4th pick. You lose a guy that scored 2,000 points. We lost quite a bit. And other people had to step up in different roles, and they did that. And Filip Rebraca I think took his game to a whole new level which was critical to our success. One of the main reasons why we are here. I thought Connor McCaffery had a spectacular season across the board, as a leader filling the stat line. You know, our point guard position was handled primarily by Jordan Bohannon for a long time. Somebody else had to step up. Kind of did it, obviously, with Ahron Ulis. A little bit of point guard by committee there: We played Tony there, we played Connor there, we played Dasonte Bowen there. Kris Murray had to take that next step, which he did. You know, his entire life he's been playing with his brother, and now, you know, more of his show and he put up incredible numbers, really consistent. All those guys were. You know, we got a spectacular season, which I think we thought we would after we moved Tony Perkins into the starting line-up last year. Last part of the season you figured he would come in and have the year he did. That was critical. I thought the guys were locked in from day one. You know, we start practice in June now, as you know. And I thought really came together. Our experienced guys and our younger guys. Great attitude in the locker room. And it's a fun team to coach.

Q. Fran, how big was it to get Patrick going I think



over the last couple games, had 23 against Nebraska. Kind of looked like his legs were under him. I know you said he was practicing well.

COACH McCAFFERY: He was. He had been practicing well. I don't think like you said when he first came back that he did have his legs underneath him. He wasn't the same. But he was still fairly productive due to his skill set and his experience. But he's really stepped up in the last couple weeks and played very well. He's a veteran guy, a guy who has been a starter, capable of being a starter, double-figure scorer. I think his defense and rebounding have really improved. And it gives you another weapon offensively along the Payton Sandfort on the perimeter. Those two guys coming off the bench. Payton, of course, Sixth Man of the Year. Also took a step -- when we were talking about the team in reference to Bobby's question, he was spectacular all season as well.

Q. Coach, could you talk a little bit more about the senior leadership that you've gotten from Filip and Connor, especially as the season has been up and down from a wins/losses perspective. How they have kept it steady?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think it's absolutely critical that those guys led the way they did. Because you're right, in our league being as balanced as it is, it can feel really good one day and not so good the next day. It's hard to win on the road in any league, but in our league it's really difficult. And the ability to stay the course and to remain professional and business-like in your approach every night in this league is not going to happen unless you have that kind of leadership. Especially with your young guys, when you need them to contribute the way that they have, it's the communication, not only on the court as it's happening in realtime, but in the locker room, after a tough loss, on the bus, on the plane. Having those kind of conversations from someone other than the coaching staff is what develops confidence. And that's the only way a young guy is going to produce at this level. So, you know, coaching is important but leadership from your seniors from Connor and Filip, there's just no substitute for that.

Q. Coach, let's talk about the matchup. Auburn, Bruce



Pearl spent time at Iowa. Elaborate a little bit on that relationship and what the type of style of the game we're going to see tomorrow.

COACH McCAFFERY: I got to know Bruce when he was at Iowa and I was at Notre Dame. Got to know Coach Davis well, Gary Close, Rich Walker, that staff. I have been friends with Bruce ever since. Done a spectacular job everywhere he's been. They run really good stuff. You know, I think they execute well at the half-court level, they can play fast, they can grind it at halfcourt if they want to. But I think ultimately they defend, they are going to put pressure on the ball, they are going to challenge you on your actions. And then also fight you on the glass. A lot of times when you get to this point in the season, everything that happens -- a lot of times it comes down to rebounding the ball, and they are really good at it. So that'll be a challenge for us.

Q. I know Bruce Pearl's team are very heavy on ball pressure and physicality, is there any team that you guys have played this year that resembles the style of defense that they like to play?

COACH McCAFFERY: You know, I think they are different than teams in our league but there are components that are similar. Rutgers is one that comes to mind, half-court defense. Northwestern, half-court defense. And then you have teams like Maryland that are really quick and athletic like them. Indiana, same thing. So we've seen a lot of what we'll see in different ways from different teams in our league.

Q. Talk about playing in Auburn. Hour away from campus or hour and a half.

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah. I don't think anybody is going to think much about that. Obviously, from a fan's perspective, fans want your team closer. So for them, I'm sure they are excited about it. But as far as how we look at this game and how we prepare will be the same. We see a lot of hostile environments in our league. Okay. Thanks, guys.

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Q. Connor, now that you've gotten the chance to dissect Auburn's team, what stands out about their defense? They are one of the best perimeter defenders in the country.

CONNOR McCAFFERY: Yeah. Their pressure. They really fly at shooters, so we definitely need to adjust throughout the game. But they really get up in your space, they are athletic, they are fast. Obviously, we have all seen that. Just going to need to be a disciplined game, try to not let them speed us up.

Q. We've heard a few times that the team wants to take sort of a business-like approach for preparing for this game but also you guys as seniors, you two in particular, this is sort of a big deal. How do you balance that emotion with the attempt to, you know, to prepare at a normal way?

FILIP REBRACA: I mean, it's definitely difficult. It's emotional. Speaking for myself, it could be one of my last games as a Hawkeye. And one of the last games in my college career. I'm out here enjoying my time, and I got to still stay focused, because if we win I feel like we can make a run. So just executing the game plan and having a business-like approach, like you said is key.

CONNOR McCAFFERY: For me as well, this is -- last year I wasn't sure if I was going to come back or not. Using my COVID year. It all hit me at once after last year because I didn't really think about that kind of stuff. So it ended up not being great for me. This year I try to deal with it better, kind of look big picture throughout the entire season and handle it early on, and as we wind down -- we only have a couple



games, I think six possible games left to go. So my career obviously coming to an end and just kind of deal with that as it goes.

Q. Obviously, Kris, top NBA prospect, how are you balancing that and making sure you prepare for NCAA Tournament with your teammates?

KRIS MURRAY: Yeah. I think it's something that I have to look at after the season. So right now I'm focusing on my team, just trying to do whatever we can to win these few games. Throughout the season, obviously that could be in the future, but honestly I take it game by game, enjoy this time with my teammate. Got a couple guys, it will be the last time around. Enjoy it with them and enjoy it with the whole team.

Q. Filip, I mean, Auburn is one of the best shot-blocking teams in the country, especially down low. Is there a defense you have played against this season that reminds you of it, and how do you prepare to go up against it?

FILIP REBRACA: I'm not sure. I feel like there's in the Big 10 we have teams that are good shot blockers. Rutgers, Omoruyi is a good shot blocker. Trayce, too. So we have great players too that are elite shot blockers. You have to take time and be patient. But I don't think this is anything that will -- I mean it's not like we haven't seen it before, but we respect that they are elite at it so we have to understand when you drive in there what's going to happen.

THE MODERATOR: Okay, gentlemen. Good luck.



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Auburn Tigers

Coach Bruce Pearl

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sellout. You cannot buy a ticket to a game at Neville Arena, period. Unless you have a season ticket and -- so our fans have then begun to buy tickets all around the SEC. So our fans have traveled. And I'm sure they will travel here to Birmingham.

Q. Coach, did you have a guess to where they might send you for this regional going in, and how happy or lucky did you feel to be so close?

COACH PEARL: Two things. One, I felt like we were somewhere between 8 and 10 based on the math. Our analytics had us around 32 in most of the categories. And the body of work was clearly what mattered most to this committee. What you did in November mattered. And, you know, Auburn was the only Power Five school to have five true road game against Power Five opponents. Only three teams played more -- had more games and more appearances against teams in this field than Auburn. Kansas, Baylor, Iowa State. We were right there. We scheduled really hard, put our kids in challenging positions, so we got rewarded. Regarding being in Birmingham, I'll answer the question even before it's asked. In '18 when we win the Championship of the SEC we went out to California. In '19 when we won the tournament and got to the Final Four it was through Salt Lake City and Kansas. And so, you know, the pod system was going then, and you know, just the way it worked out, we had to travel. And so now the fact that it's worked out, we're able to be, you know, couple hours from campus is great. That's why the pod system was created. It's great for our students and great for our fans and those that can get into the game. It won't have a huge effect on the game much because it's a neutral site in every way. But we're happy to be here. We feel fortunate to be here.

Q. Coach, so coming off of last year, you have been in this tournament, you have coached and had the experience. Coming off of last year as the No. 2 seed that confidence coming in, not having to be so, I guess, mentally into that first match up as you are in this one especially with the closer seeding. What do you learn from that and what's the mentality change possibly in this situation this year?

THE MODERATOR: Coach Pearl will give an opening statement, and then we will take your questions. Remember, no videoing is allowed at all. When you are called upon, please state your name and affiliation.

COACH PEARL: Well, it's great to be in Birmingham, Alabama. I remember when -- having worked with Mike Slive when I was at Tennessee and then when the opportunity at Auburn came open, Mike had been working really hard along the Greg Sankey and then Dan Leibovitz to have men's basketball be as competitive as all the other sports were in the SEC. And he knew he had work to do. And I've always taken some level of pride in the fact that both at Tennessee and at Auburn, I have been able to be at two great programs and have those programs will competitive in men's basketball. And then, you know, to now see the city of Birmingham get rewarded with a regional coming back, and being a host site, there's great history and traditional of NCAA Tournament basketball in this building, in this town. It's been a few years. And so what a great reward for the folks in the State of Alabama to have, you know, two great teams, two great programs be able to be here and competing for a National Championship.

Q. Bruce, how confident are you that Auburn fans will be creative enough to buy enough tickets to get in this building. Alabama knew for some time that their team was likely to be here.

COACH PEARL: I would imagine they are going to find a way to get tickets. I know it's been really difficult. My phone has rung off the hook. And I have had to say no to a lot of friends and a lot of people who wanted to get tickets because they are just hard to come by. Our fans have traveled. You know, for the last several years -- it's not been like Kentucky Blue but it's been pretty close. Neville Arena has been sold out for the last five or six years. Hard



COACH PEARL: You know, I think the only change is just when you walk out of the Auburn basketball locker room there's an AU on the wall, and then it says "make history". It's unlike any AU symbol on our campus. And I asked the guys, I said tell me a little bit about Auburn basketball history. They talked about Charles Barkley and some of the coaches and players. Talked about number one in the country a year ago and some of our championships. I asked them, I said, "This is not going to be easy. It ain't going to be easy to beat Iowa." Our guys know that. Iowa's really good. Houston is the No. 1 seed, they have to play Northern Kentucky. It's going to be really hard to win that one if we get a chance. Let me ask you a question, where would this team rank historically if we could win two games this weekend? And so all you can do is work really hard to put yourself in a position to make something really special happen. We have to make something special happen. We have to be able to stop the number two or three offensive efficiency team in the country in Iowa. Who is bigger in us in every single position, taller, longer and so forth. We're going to have to hang our hat on our defense, keep them off the offensive glass, make some shots, play some special, and survive and advance.

Q. Coach, that trip last night, you had a steak dinner. Is that something that happens a short trip? I know you have been across the country, across the world. How does that help to have a shorter trip? Does it really make an impact?

COACH PEARL: I don't know that it does. Whether you get on a plane for an hour and a half or a bus for two and a half, it doesn't really make any difference. But I will tell you, driving to Birmingham on 280 was never so much fun as with a police escort. I am telling you. I mean, it was awesome. We went through every single red light and I tell you, we got here in about an hour and a half. Everybody knows what a ride that can be.

Q. Bruce, so I know you and Charles are really tight. Have you given him some grief for picking Alabama to win it all?

COACH PEARL: Let me tell you something, Charles Barkley loves the State of Alabama. He loves Auburn first, no question about that. He has been pretty loyal to our state. All I have to say about Charles Barkley is he's going to tell you what he thinks, whether you like it or not. If he said he thinks Alabama is going to win the tournament, he's not doing it for any other reason than Charles thinks they're going to win it. I Played played against them a couple times, and they are good enough to win it. Nate Oats is one of the best coaches in the country. Done an amazing job with this team. They are talented, they are deep, and they play the right way.

Q. On that note, just how special is it to get Auburn and Alabama, I know this is unique setup to have them here in this first round. How does this speak to the growth of basketball here in this state. And what are expectations for fans just in general and around right here in around Birmingham for basketball?

COACH PEARL: Obviously, the numbers speak for themselves. And you know, I believe that in the last five out of the last six years either Auburn or Alabama has won a championship. We won it three times, and they won in two years, they won championships both regular season and the title. Auburn and Alabama have represented and been a factor in the growth of the SEC. And as far as our fan base has been in Birmingham, will it remind them of the Iron Bowl and the festivities around it? I'm sure it will just add to the history and to the rivalry.

Q. Bruce, CBS has ranked this game as the third-best matchup of all of the matchups. So here's what they wrote. They said, "If you're into seeing coaches act like children, you'll love this one. We'll set the over/under on coach technicals at a cautious 1.5." My question is, should I take the over or the under, and can you talk about the passion that you and Fran coach with?

COACH PEARL: I can only speak for myself as far as acting like a child, you know. But, you know, I've got a couple grandkids. And I love their energy, and I love their passion. And every now and then they throw a fit. And so, you still love them. I think it's one of the best matchups because of the quality of the teams and how competitive the game, you know, could be. We're going to have to play well for it to be competitive, I can tell you that. And you know, Fran wears it on his sleeve also. But we respect the game. I'll take the under on the technical fouls.

Q. Bruce, what are some of the things you love about Lior?

COACH PEARL: I love that Lior is one of our hardest workers. You know, Lior has been -- he's played the last two years and had we not taken the NCAA scholarship penalty the last two years, Lior would have been on scholarship. So he's like a scholarship player for sure. He's a great teammate. You know, he's grateful for the opportunity that he's been given at Auburn. And he goes to work everyday trying to reward Auburn for giving him the chance. I don't know that because he wasn't heavily recruited out of Mountain Brook High School that he wouldn't get the chance to play on this stage. He's truly grateful for the opportunity and wants to make the most of it.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Q What makes Fran McCaffery's offense difficult to guard? Is it the motion offense? What can you say just about the consistency that Iowa's offense has brought for the past decade or so?

COACH PEARL: A real commitment to u- tempo basketball. A lot of fans or people that profess to know the game, think the only brilliant offensive minds are the ones that control everything. That's a good shot. Wait. They got it to both sides of the floor. That's a beauty. I love when I hear that. If I can get the ball on one side of the floor and get a good look, I'm going to take that look. Shot it too quickly. That's a bad shot. Fran gives his players freedom and gives them confidence. And I think great offensive coaches that are willing to play with some tempo don't get enough credit for being as good coaches. We know sometimes they are going to take a bad shot or early, whatever. It's that commitment to the break. It's the spacing. He does a great job utilizing his personnel, putting his personnel in positions to be successful. They play unselfishly. They don't turn the ball over. They will get a shot off before they turn it over. He's been doing it a long time. He knows what works.

Q. Coach, what do you say about the matchup with Chris Murray that you are going to have in this game? Do you think it's something that's going to be super challenging in this game?

COACH PEARL: Yes, Murray is a tough matchup, he's a 6'9" that's longer. I don't know if he's 6'9" or 6'10". But he plays longer than that. And he's a guard. He's a guard. That makes him a real tough matchup, and potentially the way they use him, a mismatch. We've played against Brandon Miller who also was a tough matchup. Chris has ability more inside. We played -- and we've got -- we'll have our hands full because he can do things inside and out.

Q. Coach, of course we know the special run this team had in 2019 and maybe not the best record as far as conference play goes. Have you or any of the former players from this team shared with this current team how to maybe make another special run like that?

COACH PEARL: I know the guys are in touch. Walker and Jabari text me a lot. They are proud of our guys for being here again without them. Again without that - and, you know, heard from Sharife Cooper and heard from several of the former players. It's kind of crazy to think that, you know, Jabari would be a sophomore, Walker would be a junior, Sharife could be a junior, Isaac could be a senior. We've had some pretty good guys who run through this program who didn't stay very long. And those guys have all reached back out. They are around in the summer time.

They are still close to a lot of our players because they were teammates.

Q. Coach, what makes Johni so special, and how do you see him making an impact in this game tomorrow?

COACH PEARL: He's an old school center. Can score with his back to the basket. He is going to be and at times he has shown the ability to stretch with his three-ball. He's a very willing passer. He understands, you know, the game. And, you know, he was probably one of the more newcomers to any program in our league. Doesn't get talked a lot about. But where would we be without Johni Broome? When you lose, you know, two NBA first-rounders who are both being dominant rookies, that's a lot to lose. And Steven Pearl led the recruiting on Johni. He came in and answered any of the questions that whether his game could transfer from mid-major to high-major, and it has. Being second team All-League, All-District. This is a great start to him. And next year he could be an even more dominant player.

Q. Coach, you guys are in the top ten of 3-point defense against percentage from opponents. What's behind that, and how do you think it might help you against Iowa, who shoots a lot of three's?

COACH PEARL: A lot of it has to do with ball pressure. The interesting thing is when some of our guards have got both hands up, we may reach their letters. I don't think that a hand up, well you might get into their chin let alone their eyes. They are long, they are tall, and -- but that's probably -- ball pressure has been a function of our defense, and hopefully that can help our 3-point field goal percentage defense, because that will be important tomorrow.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.