

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Miami (FL) vs Auburn

Sunday, March 20, 2022

Greenville, South Carolina, USA

Bon Secours Wellness Arena

Auburn Tigers

Bruce Pearl

Jabari Smith

Jaylin Williams

K.D. Johnson

Media Conference

Miami - 79, Auburn - 61

BRUCE PEARL: We're obviously very disappointed that we're not able to play better and advance to the Sweet 16. It's very difficult to get to that weekend. Miami played very well, their experience, their speed, their quickness right from the jump. They had us.

Our team did an amazing job this year coming together, winning an SEC Championship. It's been a great locker room, unbelievable character, unbelievable effort, energy. Guys loved each other, played for each other, gave each other grace. We give God the glory in victory. We give him the glory in defeat. This is the plan, and we're going to learn from it.

Q. Jabari, can you just talk about what Miami did? Jim Larranaga and the players just explained what they tried to do to neutralize you. What did they do that made things a little more challenging and difficult for you?

JABARI SMITH: They're just very physical in every catch. They sent somebody any time I tried to attack or make a move. They just kept bodies on me. They switched every ball screen. So just made it kind of tough for me.

Q. Jabari, Miami's coach was just in here saying you probably could have hit ten three-pointers if they let you get in rhythm tonight. What did they do to -- how hard was it to get into rhythm against that defense with the way they were playing?



JABARI SMITH: I mean, I had some looks that just didn't fall, but credit to them, just making them tough. Keeping bodies on me, like I said, being physical with me, sending two people. They just defended well as a team, I would say.

Q. Jaylin, you guys fought back and got it to a point at halftime. What happened in the second half that they were able to kind of get out on you and rebuild that lead?

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: Like Jabari said, they're a very aggressive team, so like they didn't really give up the whole game. So they just played a better game than us overall.

Q. K.D., obviously a tremendous showing from the Auburn family tonight. Fans were out in full support. You're a guy that draws a lot of energy from the crowd. What's your message to fans who have traveled with this team and really given you a spark all season long?

K.D. JOHNSON: They've been a part of us the whole season to give us assist. At the jungle, when we travel, they come 3,000 packed on the bus, the Tiger walks. I appreciate them a lot. And I look forward to seeing them do the same thing next year.

Q. Jabari, simply what are you going to take away from this season?

JABARI SMITH: Just how hard it is to win, how important it is to build relationships throughout basketball, just how important it is to just care about your teammates, build relationships with your teammates, and just how important it is to never take nothing for granted.

The ball is only going to be bouncing for so long, so just have fun with it. Just don't take it for granted, I would say.

Q. Jaylin, how were you feeling out there? Looked like you played really well. You must have a really good dentist to get you back so quickly.

JAYLIN WILLIAMS: I felt like the first time I was out there I



was a little fatigued. I missed the whole second half the last night because of the accident that happened.

After the first one, I felt pretty good and confident in my shot. Then I played as hard as I could to try to win the game for our team.

Q. For K.D. and Jabari, both of you were new this year to Auburn. B.P. mentioned this team did an amazing job coming together. What are you going to remember about this team the most and the process of coming together with so many newcomers?

K.D. JOHNSON: For me, us all being new faces, a lot of transfers, and him being the only freshman, that played a big part of it. Our relationship off the court was tremendous. We all get along. We hang out every day, the four of us, the five of us, the whole team. And B.P. bringing us together.

We all had a good bond with our coaching staff. It felt like a family. It felt like home when we first met.

JABARI SMITH: Like he said, it just felt like a family. It really felt like more than basketball being around everybody. You know, we gave it our all, but it just didn't end how we wanted it to, but I feel like without basketball this team will still always be together no matter what.

Q. Jabari, this one's for you. Just being your first year in college basketball to have the season you guys did, I know it's tough to reflect in this moment, but what overall are you taking forward with you from this team? Especially just being in the Big Dance for the time that you guys were in it.

JABARI SMITH: Just how fun it is, just showing me why I came to college, why I chose to come to college. The ups and downs you're going to have, the tough games you're going to have, the different defenses. All of that support coming to college. I feel like that's what I'll take from it, just the challenges I faced, the good times I had, the bad games, the good games, just taking it with me and taking Auburn. Just thanking them for everything.

I feel like, if I had to make a decision a thousand more times, I wouldn't choose nowhere else but Auburn. It was fun.

Q. Jabari, just to be clear, you've already determined your future? Do you know what you're doing next?

JABARI SMITH: No, I don't know yet.

Q. Bruce, in the losses you guys have had this

season, Jabari and Walker played really, really well. Tonight off games for both of them. What was different about this one? Was it something Miami was doing on defense, or what went into that?

BRUCE PEARL: If I knew, I probably could have prevented it. It's like sometimes when you talk to the losing coach and he doesn't have the answers, because I didn't have the answers. That's a good question.

Jabari and Walker have been as consistent as anybody we've had, right? Part of it is just getting off to a bad start. Walker picked up two early fouls, missed a couple of easy ones early. I thought Miami, I thought their ball pressure, it bothered us early. We came down, and we got disrupted. Zep was disrupted passing out of the double-team and things that we knew they were going to do that we hoped to take advantage of the double-team, and we really never did.

We were inviting the trap and then trying to make plays out of it. So --

Q. Bruce, they had 30 fast break points. You guys had one fast break point. Then there was a lot of short shots. Was fatigue a factor at all?

BRUCE PEARL: No, I don't think the fatigue was a factor. We were disrupted. We were getting outplayed. Our team hadn't -- we haven't been outplayed like that all year, as I stop and think about our losses. Our first loss at Arkansas, we got possession to win the game in regulation. Overtime loss.

Our next loss, I think, was at Florida. We got the ball to win it in regulation. We go to Tennessee, and we're down three with less than a minute. That's our third loss. In the A&M game, we came back, and I don't know what it got down to, it was like four late, something like that.

This is the first time. This is the first time that we got it handed to us because we just didn't know how to respond.

My best player is 18, and they have four players that are 24, and that experience showed, it really did. So one of the things we talked about after the game was what can we learn from this? What can we learn?

I thought just we hadn't been hit in the mouth like that all year. We responded, and by the end of the first half we battled back. But when they hit us in the mouth again at the start of the second half, I thought of going with a different starting lineup, and I probably should have because of how poorly we started. I put that on me. I probably should have gone with a different lineup to start

the second half because that lineup started so poorly.

Q. Bruce, you had seen them on tape and everything. Now that you've seen them and played them in person against your team, how good do you think this Miami team is? Going forward, they were picked 12th in the ACC this year. What do you think about this team overall?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, because they had so many new guys. We were picked fifth in our league. They're good. They've got good pieces. They're really quick. The guards, each one of those guards, Wong and Moore and McGusty, they're all going to win -- those three kids are going to win their matchup almost every night, right?

Then Sam just is an unusual player for what he does. Then Miller was really quick. I think Miller's quickness bothered our five men a little bit.

They don't have great depth, so that could be an issue for them. But they're a tough cover, and they've got older experienced guys that have been there and done that.

Q. Coach, you kind of touched on this earlier. They get off to the good start, and again you've got all the momentum going in at the half. They went on a 7-0 run in the first three minutes and all like that. Do you think that really took it out of your kids mentally to have fought back and end up back in the hole again?

BRUCE PEARL: It very well could have. We had some things that we wanted to try to get done early, and we just didn't. The game, the second half started just like the first half started. So it probably took something out of us.

Q. Bruce, I know you were invested in what Jabari said he learned at Auburn, presumably as he's about to become a high lottery pick. What did you enjoy about having him on your team?

BRUCE PEARL: He's such a great competitor and such a great teammate. He truly does love his teammates. Those guys get along really well. We had a lot of fun this year, we really did.

He's been raised right. He's got fantastic parents. He's got great people around him. His AAU coaches, his high school coaches, his mentors -- he's got it all. He really does.

He's not selfish. He's hard working. He's disciplined. He's got his routine. He's a pro. He had a great experience at Auburn, and he made history at Auburn. So I'm obviously very, very proud of him.

Q. You mentioned your best player being 18. Down the stretch as it's sort of slipping away, is it a little harder to sort of find the answers with a team as young as this one? How do you sort of go about where to turn to for the answers down the stretch there?

BRUCE PEARL: Jabari, Wendell, K.D., they have the ability to really turn it on, right? And Walker has been terrifically consistent all year long. I will not remember much about this game as it relates to Walker. I'm going to remember him being the best defensive player in college basketball. I'm going to remember him making plays in the air. He got two early fouls, and that was disruptive a little bit. He missed a couple around the basket. And he is so hard on himself, right?

But we just couldn't get anything going offensively.

Q. Any reason that Walker was unable to play the last 6:30? And also what Jaylin did the last two games, how much can that help him going into next year with probably a bigger chance to play more?

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah, we just obviously, down like we were, we played -- Jaylin wound up playing. When Walker got in foul trouble, we started rotating Jaylin at the five. Hadn't do that much all year, and Jaylin played a lot of it last year. Obviously having the two of them on the floor was good.

We didn't do it so much this year because Dylan Cardwell and Walker were so good at the five and so consistent, there really wasn't much need to, but we were down. So we needed to have them both out there on the floor a little bit. And just in the last five or six minutes Jaylin would have played so well that we just had him up there.

Q. His future?

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah, man, I'm excited to build it next year around Jaylin. We have been the winningest program in the SEC over the last five years. We've won three championships in five years. I take great pride in the consistency of our program's success, and I'm ready to build it back.

Q. All things considered, this felt like a transformative season for Auburn basketball during the regular season coming out of the pandemic. What are you going to take away from this season going into next year?

BRUCE PEARL: The SEC is going to get crushed



because of our tournament performance. Arkansas is the only team that's alive. I think we just beat each other up all year. It was such a grind. Such a grind. That's the only thing I can tell you because the league was really, really good. We didn't show it in the tournament.

But what I'll take from this team is the fact that they brought it every night. They won more games on the road than any team in the SEC in league play, and we have the best home court advantage in league play. That's why we were able to finish. We finished 15-3 in the league. So champions.

Then as far as the future is concerned, I just always promise those kids, I'm going to bring in good guys. I'm going to bring in guys they want to be around, guys they want to live with, hang with, and go to church with, go to lunch with. That's what we'll do.

Q. Bruce, 30.4 percent shooting. It was your worst performance of the season. Do you think it was something Miami was doing? Was it a combination of guys just having an off night?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, I think it was a combination of what Miami did defensively, their speed, their quickness. They turned us over. They stole the ball ten times. We had some afraid to fail moments. We missed a lot of balls around the rim, just a ton around the basket. We panicked a little offensively.

I obviously didn't do a great job getting us the better looks in this game, but it was -- our front line has always been very dominant, and tonight we -- even starting the second half, my gosh, we got the ball inside a couple of times and just weren't able to get it down.

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