

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball Tournament

Friday March 9, 2018

Bruce Pearl Desean Murray Mustapha Heron Auburn

Alabama - 81, Auburn - 63

BRUCE PEARL: It was a tale of two halves. We did what we wanted to do in the first half. I thought we executed pretty well. We shot it well, which is what we needed to do. I thought the zone was effective. We made some really good effort, energy plays. We had 15 defensive rebounds. Only had 2 offensive rebounds. I thought we were -- really played well.

At the start of the second half, they came down and flipped the table on us really quickly. I don't remember. We didn't get as good of looks offensively early, but I just remember our zone wasn't nearly as effective, and they made some shots and got a couple of loose balls, and next thing you know, it's close.

And Sexton is a tremendous, tremendous individual player. I mean, he's a tough cover, and he can get downhill and get to the rim.

We weren't able to protect the rim in our defense, whether it be Horace was able to wall them off a few times, but he missed being able to take charges or block shots or do a better job of keeping Sexton out of the lane. I thought that was a real key to their second half surge.

Q. Mustapha, can you just take us through the attitude of the team and, I guess, how you guys played in the first half and again through the second half and kind of just how that changed throughout the game.

MUSTAPHA HERON: I think first half we came out with a lot of energy. We changed sides. So I think everything was working first half.

Second half, they definitely hit us in the mouth first, and I think that always hurts. I think that's hurt us lately, coming out in the second half. So that's something we do got to go back and look at and just try to fix it as



much as possible.

Q. You seem particularly heated right there after the game, immediately after the game. What was going on there? Kind of describe -- because you were angry, you could see on TV, like hollering at somebody or something there, right there on the handshake line.

BRUCE PEARL: Just as I was walking to my locker room, I just had to -- a gentleman just was in my path, and I had to negotiate -- try and negotiate around him. I think he may have clipped me, and then he said something to me. Of course, I should be able to walk off the floor without having somebody stand in front of me and try to make contact with me. So that was all it was.

Q. Bruce, can you take some positives out of Desean's first half, 15 points, hit some shots? That had to feel good for him going into an NCAA Tournament.

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah, just terrific. Desean, the last couple of weeks, hasn't been quite the matchup problem that he's been throughout a lot of the season. He and I spent some time together talking about that this week. It was just really rewarding to be visiting with him about it, and he's so accountable about it. And he says, yeah, I've got to get going. And we talked about some ways that he could get going.

He really spent a lot of time in the gym this week, got some shots, got extra shots, felt in good rhythm with his shooting. Again, the fact -- I do believe the rebounding was 15 defensive, 2 offensive. I mean, having to get 15 defensive rebounds, that's what you've got to do. As a result, they didn't get second chance. We got the ball down the floor. We got some transition. It was good.

Then the second half they made shots, and they beat us to some 50-50 balls.

But getting Desean back, that was encouraging. You could see him step up. So when you see somebody -- well, either in a big game or come tournament time in a big moment -- step up like that, it does give the team a little bit of extra courage, but we didn't have enough of that. We just didn't. We didn't have eight guys in the rotation, and I think probably six or seven of those guys

in the rotation would say, I can play better.

So you're not going to win against a team as talented and as deep as Alabama. They are one of the most talented, athletic, long teams certainly in our league.

When you watch -- I'll tell you what, the league should be proud. There's not another -- I watched the 8-9 game yesterday. It was Texas A&M and Alabama, and the 8-9 game, they are pros out there. I mean, there are a lot of pros out there, and that just tells you how good this league is. That was a great game, and it's been a great tournament.

We just didn't have it in the second half tonight.

Q. You guys have always made runs when teams have kind of put you down. Didn't come in the second half. Were you surprised? Did you have a feeling that you guys were going to be able to turn around after you guys went cold? What happened that you guys weren't able to respond at all?

BRUCE PEARL: You know, I didn't -- body language wasn't great. When they made their run, I think -- I could just see that it bothered us more than it should have. And then I thought down at our end, on the offensive end, we did not execute, and we started to push. We started to force things.

Bryce has been really, really patient, but Bryce knows what he can do. So when he missed some open looks, easy looks, he tried to -- and he was capable of forcing things a little bit, which sorts of gets us out of the things we need to do.

Jared Harper, when he plays well, he's really good. Jared could just never get it going. They did a good job on him defensively. So I think Alabama's elevated play probably bothered us as much as anything.

Q. You mentioned this already, but just what makes Sexton so tough to defend, especially when he gets rolling like he did in the second half?

BRUCE PEARL: He is extremely powerful, and he's strong. He's fast. He does a great job getting into contact and scoring through contact. I think he -- knowing that we don't have either real shot blockers or real size, rim protectors, he was able to get downhill and do more damage against us.

Some of our -- I thought our guards did a pretty good job. It can be frustrating sometimes guarding him. He -- it was -- he's a tough cover. Let's just say that.

Q. Not to dwell on Collin, but you saw the Texas A&M game last night and the game-winning shot and you saw what he's able to do tonight. Is he

one of those guys capable of carrying a team through the postseason sort of like we've seen in years past?

BRUCE PEARL: Look, if he's one of the top ten players in the country and one of the top prospects that's been talked about all year long, certainly, he's capable of doing tremendous, tremendous one-on-one damage. The key is to be able to utilize his ability, and without it taking away from the team aspect. He's in a pretty good rhythm right now. He's doing what he's doing, and he can do it really productively.

And the other guys are sort of fitting in around him, which is -- when you've got a great player like that, you've got to let him go. You've got to let him go and let him get downhill, and he gets downhill as well as anybody.

I think one of the things Alabama has done a good job with -- and even though they struggled down the stretch, they lost to five NCAA Tournament teams. But they've really done a good job in transition. They really emphasize getting it out and going and attacking in transition, and they're really, really hard to guard, and they're productive in transition. So they've got something going on right now.

Q. I know losing McLemore was a big blow, but how of a concern is the interior defense heading into the tournament? What can you guys do to compensate?

BRUCE PEARL: Our three front line players are Desean Murray, Chuma Okeke, and Horace Spencer. Those are our three front line players. That's all we've got. This team has always managed to find a way. We've got to do a better job of building a wall and not letting -- not having to have those guys have to make so many plays at the rim. I think we still lead the league in blocked shots. I'm not sure if we still do, but it's close, right?

Part of the reason is because guys are getting there too easily to put us in position to have to block those shots. So our interior defense is a challenge.

Q. You've got six or seven days until your next game. What's going to be the big thing to reset and get ready to play?

BRUCE PEARL: One of the things I talked to the team about, and we'll see where our draw's going to be, but let's say we're in the 4, 5 area. I've been a 12 before, and I've beaten the 5. But the most interesting thing about the 5-12 matchups is anything can happen in those matchups.

I want the team right now to understand that there's as good a chance, no matter what, if we can advance past

the first one, there's a pretty good chance that the second one may not be the higher seed or the better seed. There just is. It's a tough draw because there's so many upsets. So therefore, since we'd be a 4 or 5, we'd be one of those teams that could upset. But it also could maybe pay off the next day.

I just want them to get excited about the fact that we're going to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2003. Losing today doesn't take any of the shine off of what this team accomplished. We just weren't able to build on it by winning three games here and winning our next championship.