

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Auburn Tigers

Bruce Pearl

Men's Media Day Press Conference



Mike Slive said he wanted to do, what he really worked to try to get started, what Commissioner Sankey has continued to do.

Q. We've seen more and more mid-major prospects come up to the high major level. You have some ju-co guys making the jump. What does that do for the variance in your possible outcomes when you are relying on guys to make that leap?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, I'm not sure I understand the question, but I'll try to answer what I think you're asking.

In a sense that if you've got a young man that was in mid-major basketball, he was seen by most of us in high major most likely. Maybe he wasn't quite big enough or fast enough, his skill level wasn't quite there. He didn't rise to the level of a Power Five-caliber prospect.

Then he goes to that level, he gets coached, he's in the weight room, he gets better, grows a couple inches. Next thing you know, a 21-year-old junior to be at mid-major, you now have to evaluate him compared to what you could get from a top 100 high school player who is 18 years old.

The bottom line is that 21-year-old has got a lot of advantages both in experience and just ability, size, toughness, so on, so forth. I think everybody is trying to get old and trying to stay old.

With the exception of UConn, we saw that in the Final Four. The result now will be, rather than me bringing in three or four high school players in each class, then maybe a transfer, I think the reality we bring in one or two high school players and then fill the roster up with transfers.

Transfer is a word like agent, or even lawyer sometimes, for those of you that are lawyers. My athletic director I think has a lawyer background. I give him a hard time about that all the time. It's a bad word. A great lawyer, worth his weight in gold. A great agent, pays for what he's able to do for you.

I transferred from Division II to mid-major. I transferred from Wisconsin, Milwaukee, mid-major to Tennessee. This

THE MODERATOR: We are ready to begin with Coach Pearl. We'll start with questions.

Q. Big topic from a lot of other coaches today has been how the SEC has changed so much, be more competitive. You've been here longer than a lot of the others. How have you seen the league change?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, if you add my six years at Tennessee, then my three years on sabbatical, after I got fired at Tennessee, then going into my 10th year at Auburn, I've been coaching longer than anybody in the league (smiling).

I'm really proud of the SEC. I'm proud of this league. I remember coming in at Tennessee, obviously Kentucky was the dominant program, Billy Donovan had Florida right there. Everybody else was sort of just everybody else.

Then when I came back to Auburn, the league had already begun to start to get deeper. Became greater commitments from athletic directors, fan bases. I think it started with the quality of the coaches. There are so many great coaches.

Maybe there was a time when other great coaches from other conferences didn't come from to the SEC because it was a football conference or something else. But that's not the case now.

Facilities have improved. Everybody's drawing, everybody has great home-court advantages. We've begun, like in the last I think four or five years, to put more guys in the NBA than anybody else, than any league. That stuff matters as far as recruiting is concerned, the best players, iron sharpens iron, they want to play against the best players.

I'm proud of the SEC, the leadership. I'm proud of what



is the land of opportunity. I was blessed to be able to take advantage of some opportunities and transfer up.

I'm happy for my Division II players, my junior college players, my mid-major players who are hungry and feel blessed to have been able to earn the right to be able to play at the highest level.

Q. You said last week you were kind of getting close to rounding out a starting lineup. What was your thought process on wanting to do that at this stage? Have you made your way there this week?

BRUCE PEARL: I told the team last week that I was going to be letting them know this week who the starting five was. I've not been asked by one player. We've got so much parity, so much competition in each position, I'm not sure they want to know, which I think is a good thing.

The bad thing is when the ball gets tossed, our five guys may not be that much better than anybody else's five guys. But when I go to the bench, I'm not dropping off. I'm different, but I'm not dropping off.

We will have a 10-man rotation. Yeah, I've got some tough decisions to make because literally I literally have I would say almost nine guys out of the 10 that would really anticipate that they're going to be the starter.

I haven't done it yet.

Q. Last time we saw you here was for March Madness. A big thing for the city. Alabama, Auburn here. How has basketball grown? Football comes to mind, but now it's turning into basketball as well.

BRUCE PEARL: Kevin Scarbinsky was writing about this for years when I first got the job. Oftentimes reminds us here in the state of Alabama of when Gene Bartow was at UAB, when Wimp was at Alabama, Sonny was at Auburn. Basketball in the state of Alabama was in a pretty good place. There was great competition, great coaches, the fan bases.

I've sort of tried to pick up on that since I got to Auburn. I don't know exactly what the math is. Marlene would probably know more than me. I think if you look at the last few regular season SEC tournament champions, I think Auburn and Alabama, those two schools are going object on that latest in the last six years more than anybody total. Did you think you would be able to say that six years ago?

I take great pride in being able to help contribute to that. Look at the job that Andy is doing at UAB right now, what Nate is doing at Alabama. We've been a competitive

program all throughout the state.

I don't know that I've seen it trickle down into high school yet. We're so good in football and baseball, those athletes in those communities still tend to go in that direction. But certainly I think it's allowed all of us to be able to recruit locally and nationally to maintain a level of competitiveness. And I'm proud of it.

Q. Broome was selected Pre-Season All-SEC. You brought him here today. What does he mean to your team and how important is it to bring back so much leadership?

BRUCE PEARL: Really glad for Johni, going back to the transfer question. He's at Morehead State. He's one of the best players in that league. The question is, will it translate. Last year he was Second Team All-Conference, this year Pre-Season First Team. He answered that question.

He's an old-school front line player. He looks like he could play in a men's league for the next 20 years. Throw him the ball in a block, he's going to up, under, fake. He can use either hand. He's going to score. He's going to get fouled. We're going to go through him. People are going to double-team him so he's going to have to kick it out a little bit. He's got some maturity. Worked at his game.

His body is lighter. He's moving a little bit better. I think he can impact the game a little bit more on the defensive end.

Last year he took a run at the NBA. He did something that not many guys are able to do. He got invited to the G League combine, then was picked as only one of a handful of guys that actually got to go to the combine. He played well.

I think there was a chance that he could have been a late second round pick last year. So he's worked hard to put himself in that position.

I think if you take a look at Johni and Dylan Cardwel, then you take a look at Jaylin Williams, who will be a fifth-year graduate student at Auburn now, when Jaylin Williams wins his next basketball game, he will become the winningest player in Auburn basketball history. We just started the season. We're very excited for Jaylin.

Then Chaney Johnson is a Division II player, one of the better players in Division II, and he is going to be one of the better players in our league this year or next.

I really like my front line. I love our depth.



Q. You joined the chorus today of saying get old, stay old.

BRUCE PEARL: They got it from me. So they joined my chorus.

Q. Does that make John Calipari the craziest person in college basketball?

BRUCE PEARL: They're all five stars, McDonald's All-Americans, they're all in the top 20 on the draft board. Nobody is feeling sad for John (smiling).

Q. A lot of years in this pre-season, it's been Kentucky and the field in the SEC. That's no longer the case. What do you feel like has been the biggest key for so many other different programs to be on that level?

BRUCE PEARL: Well, first of all, I got to tell you that there's nowhere I go in the SEC where I'm more honored to step open the floor than Rupp. I honestly sometimes feel like I'm not worthy to have the opportunity to coach in that building with that history in front of those fans. So Kentucky has and will lead the way in men's basketball in the SEC. That's never going to change.

But what has changed is there have just been more programs that have invested in it and taken it more seriously. The game has grown and the SEC has grown along with it.

I remember going back to what Mike Slive and Greg Sankey talked about, we're the best conference in America, and whoever is second is second by a long shot. I'm talking about men and women's sports, all sports. Just look at the championships.

In men's basketball, it just hadn't evolved that way. They made a commitment to it. Great coaches. Better facilities. We're recruiting better players. We got a commissioner now of basketball, when Dan came in, now Garth is here. We hired people that were involved in the Big East. Mike Tranchese was an adviser for a while. NBA officials.

The league went ahead and said, Look, we have to figure this out. They brought in really good administrators to help Commissioner Sankey to figure out the schedule, what tournaments do we need to play in, what do we need to do to elevate our brand.

They've done it. Then the SEC Network. The SEC Network also kind of came in at the same time that basketball started to improve. I think there's a direct correlation to our contract with ABC, ESPN and the SEC Network.

Q. You get a big transfer in Denver Jones. For fans of Auburn that haven't had an opportunity to watch that kid play yet, what is he bringing? How much are you going to rely on him to carry the load offensively?

BRUCE PEARL: Again, I think your questions have been really, really good, to give me a chance to talk about Denver Jones, Chaney Johnson, Division II player.

Denver Jones, grows up in Huntsville, Alabama. A good player, not a great player. Has to work his way through prep school, then a year of junior college. Then he winds up being pretty good in junior college. Florida International, in Conference USA, takes a chance on him. Lo and behold, a couple years later he becomes an All-Conference player.

To do that he's worked. He's been in the weight room. He's in the gym all the time. By the way, my best players are my hardest workers. That's almost always the case. That is the case with this year's team. Whoever are my top three or four guys are the top three or four guys that are in the gym every morning, late at night. Denver Jones is one of them.

I'm excited for him in his first college game against Baylor. I'm excited for him when we play an exhibition game coming up in a couple weeks because you're going to see a guy that can shoot it, score it, defend it.

Those guys come in, and they're humble and grateful. They want to be coached. They've been at those different levels. Been in a lot of buses and vans. They've had a lot of McDonald's for pregame meals. Now he's finally worked to a place that I'm excited that Auburn is going to give him the opportunity to let him show what he can do.

Q. Starting the year with Baylor, South Dakota. I think this is the first time Auburn has started a game of the season with a Power Conference team since '89.

BRUCE PEARL: How did that go in '89?

Q. Part of a tournament. Let's see. 92-79 against Michigan State.

BRUCE PEARL: Was that a loss or win?

Q. Loss.

BRUCE PEARL: Figures (smiling).

Q. It's a little different for Auburn to start with a team like this.



BRUCE PEARL: Right.

Q. What are you expecting to get out of a trip like that?

BRUCE PEARL: With the league being where it's at, how do I stay relevant? How do I keep Auburn basketball relevant in this incredible league? I have to play Baylor and South Dakota, put it on ESPN, let my kids have a chance.

Let me tell you, I take great responsibility in our non-conference. No team in the SEC has won more non-conference games than Auburn. A couple really big wins.

At the same token, I put my conference at risk by going out there and playing Baylor in that situation, USC, knowing they brought everybody back, loaded, going out there first. Playing in Indiana in Atlanta. Indiana will be I think by the time they get to us a top-25 team.

There's obviously -- we play Notre Dame in New York. Playing Notre Dame in New York is harder for a fan base than playing them in South Bend. Notre Dame will have more fans in New York than they'll get in South Bend. It would be easier to play them there.

It's to stay relevant. It's to tell my kids a message, I believe in you. I don't care who we're playing. I don't care. I believe in you. You came here to try to win a championship. You came here to get to a Final Four. If I don't schedule hard, then obviously I'm concerned we're not good enough. And we ain't afraid.

Q. Obviously having a former assistant coach and player transfer within the conference, what was the like having a father-son duo on the same team?

BRUCE PEARL: Steven Pearl and I are a father-son duo, been father-son for a long time. It's been great to share so much. What are your life's greatest moments, to get the chance to share them with family is unbelievable, whether it's a championship or the birth of a child, whatever it would be.

That father-son thing is wonderful.

I'm just so happy that at the end of Allen Flanigan's career he was playing great basketball. I got to tell you, I'm very proud of my team from a year ago. People ask me what kind of year did you have last year?

I say, we had a good year. A good year. We didn't have a

great year, we had a good year. If we'd have held on to the lead against Houston, in Birmingham, then we go good goes to great. Houston was the No. 2 team in the country. We had 'em by 10. We missed 17 free throws in the game, didn't finish the job. But we were good enough as the sixth or seventh best team in our league to go in the NCAA tournament and play Houston, who was the No. 2 team in the country, and we had 'em. We were right there.

I was just very, very proud of our team. We don't do that without Allen Flanigan playing the best basketball at the end of his career at Auburn.

Q. You said you love your front court, but your best teams have been elite in the backcourt. Aden Holloway, how has he adapted so far?

BRUCE PEARL: I think quarterback play is pretty important in the SEC, right? It's the only position that we're young at with Tre Donaldson and Aden Holloway. Tre was a football player, a strong safety. He could have gone and played high major football at Ohio State, Auburn, Alabama, Florida, anywhere. He's one of my point guards. That's a tough kid and a great, great competitor.

They can both really shoot it. They can both shoot it as well as any of the point guards I've had. The question is, whether they play make as well? Will they defend as well? Will they lead a team as well? That's a lot of stuff to be determined.

They're both very capable. Aden has something special in him, from the standpoint of being a gamer. Tre has some toughness and leadership in him. They're both going to play.

Q. What does it mean to bring the Auburn basketball brand to the Rocket City to come back to Huntsville on December the 13th? And also I know you've been back (indiscernible) recruiting two prominent student-athletes (indiscernible). What does it mean to bring Auburn to Huntsville?

BRUCE PEARL: Nice try to get me to step into something which would get me in trouble with the compliance. I'm not jumping into there (laughter).

Q. (No microphone.)

BRUCE PEARL: All right.

We went down to South Alabama and played in Mobile. We started playing in Birmingham when I first got the job. We have great donors and alumni throughout the state. No greater than in Huntsville. We've been trying to get up



there. Just hasn't been an opportunity.

We're playing UNC- Asheville, an NCAA team from a year ago. The game is already sold out. Like a hard sellout. Go on StubHub right now and try to get a ticket for that game. I guarantee, it's like 250, 300 bucks for a decent seat. Every game is sold out at Auburn.

One of the things I'm really, really happy about and pleased about, you're seeing this more and more in the SEC, is Auburn is beginning to travel. Our fans are traveling with our program. So whether it's Huntsville or some other places in the league where there's some opportunity to get some tickets. I just think those environments where you have sort of like -- not that's a neutral site, but where there are fans, a little bit more like SEC football. We're excited about it. We're very excited about the quality of our opponent.

Q. You said a few minutes ago that no one feels sorry for John Calipari with all the five-star freshmen. The truth is, a freshman-laden team has not been successful except the 2015 Duke team. Do you think it can work for him?

BRUCE PEARL: Yeah, absolutely. He's got some tremendous players, tremendous kids, guys that are going to be lottery. He's going to coach 'em up.

Look, they're going to guard. They're going to play for each other. Typically those teams get better throughout the season because they are so young. The challenge is they always play a tough skill early in the year, so you can't really know what they're going to be like come March.

Again, I think if I had the ability to recruit five stars at every position, I wouldn't be turning them down just to do something different.

John's going to do it his way.

Q. You're a public figure. You've been critical of the current administration in the White House. Do you have any political aspirations?

BRUCE PEARL: No. Guys, you guys know I stand with Israel. But I'm very pleased today to talk about Auburn basketball. I'm really grateful for all the questions about Auburn basketball today. We could talk about other stuff at other times. I want to put all my attention on the program, the kids, on the conference. I'm really grateful for your questions today.

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