

Pac-12 Women's Basketball Media Day

Wednesday, October 11 2017

Charli Turner Thorne Courtney Ekmark Sabrina Haines Arizona State Sun Devils



CHARLI TURNER THORNE: So in my 21st season at Arizona State, I can honestly say this will be the youngest team that I've ever coached probably at any school, but certainly in my 21 years at ASU.

So I was trying to think of a story that could kind of relate maybe what we're going through. Yes, okay, we're going to go -- we've got one for you.

So this was back when my two older sons were like five and seven. Okay? They wouldn't do anything that my husband and I asked them to do. They just wouldn't listen. They wouldn't listen. We couldn't get them to do the things that we needed them to do.

So we tried timeouts. We tried all sorts of things. So finally I went to the pastor at our church and said, This is what's going on. Can you help us? He's got kids and everything, and he's like, Yeah, I'll come over to the house. I want Liam first.

So he puts Liam in a room and sits him in a chair. Walks up to Liam and says, Where's God? Liam's just sitting there. He's got big, blue eyes. He's just looking at him. And Pastor kind of walks away, comes back, Where's God? Now Liam's getting really nervous. He's fidgety and getting scared.

Then the pastor comes back, and in his biggest, boomingest voice, Where's God? And at this point Liam jetted out of the room, ran upstairs, put himself in his closet sobbing uncontrollably.

So the older son is surveying all of this. He's next. He goes into Liam's room, Liam, what happened? What happened? Liam's like, I don't know, but God's missing, and they think we did it.

So when I think about our team this year, I think about youthful innocence, but also just an incredible ability to do big things, to do really big things.

Very exciting team. We lost our front line. We lost

Kelsey, Sophie and Quinn. But we've added Courtney; Sophia Elenga, an incredibly talented junior college post from France; and we get Jamie Ruden back, who did not get to play a single game in the Pac-12, but you get incredible glimpses of her abilities in postseason.

We have Kianna Ibis doing the things that we knew she could do. Emerging really well. And also Charnea Johnson-Chapman looks really, really good in terms of our postgame.

Then I know a lot of you were enamored by our incredible back-court guards last year. Very, very young. And, of course, Sabrina and our three newbies. Last year they didn't know what they didn't know, but now they know. So Sabrina, Robbi Ryan, Reili Richardson, Kiara Russell are a year older, a year wiser, have really grown immensely, and we're super excited about how we're coming together.

So I think it's kind of a fun blend. We don't have any seniors, but we're really built with some tremendous juniors and sophomores, and we're excited about it.

Q. So you have a complete change in your front court. But you not only have those changes, you have changes in your coaching staff. So tell me how as a coaching staff, because you've got to bring them together, and how are the players -- or how is everything meshing?

CHARLI TURNER THORNE: Yeah, how's it meshing. So we have two new coaches on our staff. So Jackie Moore is back with us.

Angie Nelp is really a rising star in coaching, and she -- I kind of liken her a lot to Amanda's position in terms of being our offensive coordinator. Great offensive mind. A lot like Amanda. She was a great player back in the day. Played with Becky Hammon at Colorado State, was All-American in high school, great pro player. And going to have a baby any second. Just a little sidebar.

But she's really bringing that element to us, which is fantastic. A great teacher of the game.

Then we've added, of course, one of our all-time greats, Briann January. And that's exciting. Because Laura Hughes was on my staff for 15 years, and then two years at NAU, and I coached her for two years, and

she was kind of our defensive coordinator. I haven't necessarily had anybody since she left.

Bri obviously is a great offensive player, but working with our guards and being able to kind of coordinate the defense, I mean, she understands it as well as anybody. That's really exciting.

So it's kind of blended really well. And I'll add, it's not a coaching position, but Terri Mitchell, a long-time successful coach from Marquette is my special assistant now. So she will be helping us break down film and game plan. While she doesn't get to coach the players, we are going to be capitalizing on her basketball mind to help us win championships.

Q. Coach, to follow up on that last point on the staff, what's it do to have a former player like January on your staff who is so accomplished, especially for a team that's as young as this one is? Then for the players, Courtney and Sabrina, what's it been like being able to learn from a player like Briann January?

COURTNEY EKMARK: As Charli just said, Briann is amazing. Not only does she know what she's doing, but she's really positive and awesome to be around every day. It's really cool because -- I don't know about you, but I grew up watching ASU women's basketball, and she was on the teams that I used to watch when I was ten years old. So it's kind of come around full swing. It's really neat to be able to be coached by her.

CHARLI TURNER THORNE: I think your dad recruited her to be an assistant coach. She actually helped coach Courtney's little team -- I guess it was a club team back then.

COURTNEY EKMARK: Yeah, it's actually funny because I'm having flashbacks to when I was 12 years old because she used to coach me back then, and now she's coaching me again.

Q. (Off microphone)?

COURTNEY EKMARK: Yeah, yeah, just like with Youth AAU.

CHARLI TURNER THORNE: It was volunteer coaching, yeah.

Q. This is for all three of you, but I'll start with Sabrina. Last year was hard, right, with Kelsey's injury. You were able to turn it on a little bit at the end of the year. But it felt like a hard year and you had to fight the whole way through. So what is the feeling that each of you have coming into this season? And maybe what are you most excited about too?

SABRINA HAINES: I think personally I'm super excited for this season. Last season was definitely we had a lot of adversity, but I think that's really what made our team so strong and why we had a great run in the NCAA Tournament and a better postseason than we did probably regular season.

But we have such a great group right now and incredible players. We have all been working in the gym. The coaches have been helping us get better every single day. Personally I'm more confident in myself and, of course, like our team and everything like that. And just knowing we're about to start a great season and hopefully build off what we left off of, if that makes sense, last postseason.

Like I said, I'm just super excited.

COURTNEY EKMARK: Yeah, adding on to that, just the way they finished last season, it shows that we can play that way. I mean, you saw Bri step up at the end. She has like three charges against South Carolina, which is crazy. She's playing great.

So adding on to how we finish, yeah, we lose some people, but just looking forward to getting better and having a good year this year.

CHARLI TURNER THORNE: Okay, should I correct that? We don't say "hard." Hard is losing a loved one. Hard is some of the things that are going on in our world today, like in Vegas and stuff. But "challenging," that is the word we use.

We just love our fun challenges. It was a not-so-fun challenge at times because of the injuries last year.

But we -- and I say "we," our coaching staff -- could not have been more proud of the way that our team finished. You know, we could say would've, could've, should've on our seeding for the NCAA Tournament, with that committee supposedly knowing we were getting our players back for the NCAA Tournament, but just the fact that we went down to the last possession with the team that ultimately won the National Championship and played so well on their home floor in front of their 9,000 fans, I think really showed this team -- not that they doubted themselves. They knew they were overcoming things that, yeah, one of the best teams in the country and we're going to build on this.

Q. Courtney, you've played at UConn, but you're from Phoenix, obviously. To come back now, what is that experience at UConn -- how has that helped you and how will that help you at ASU and have the career that you've dreamed about?

COURTNEY EKMARK: So, yeah, playing at UConn is great. Won a couple National Championships. Now

I'm at Arizona State, and I'm really looking forward to playing for Charli, because I love her culture and how not only does she coach us on the court, but teaches us how to be nice young women and how to succeed in life as well. So I'm really looking forward to getting back on the court this year.

Q. Charli, you have very good guards. Will we see a time that you really play five guards? Seriously? Because those are your best players right now and most experienced. Will you do that at times this season?

CHARLI TURNER THORNE: You'll just have to watch and see. You know what, I'm not going to rule it out. Certainly small ball, we've had some of our best seasons. For those of you that have followed us for a long time, some of our best seasons ever were small ball. Small ball has kind of ruined basketball because look with the Warriors and around the country as well.

So, yeah, we're going to have some small ball lineups this year. We'll want our best players on the floor as much as possible.

Q. Courtney, what did you get out of last season when you had to watch and not participate? How are you better even though you had to watch and not on the floor?

COURTNEY EKMARK: I'd have to contribute a lot of that to my coaches. It was tough to sit out because I'm a competitor and I love playing, but at the same time it was also a chance to sit back and reflect and see what's going on and learn a whole new program and system. I also had extra time for extra workouts and some extra stuff, so I'm thankful the coaches took their time to help me get better.

Q. Courtney, I was house hunting last year in Arcadia, and my Realtor asked what I did for a living. I said Pac-12 Network, women's basketball, play-by-play. She said, Oh, do you know Courtney? And I said, Yeah, I'm aware she's at ASU. And she said, Have you ever seen her play tennis? And I said, No, I have not. Do tell. So I understand you're an amazing tennis player. And to that point, can anybody on the team beat you?

SABRINA HAINES: I'm going to just tell you, I like to talk a lot of trash as far as any sports, so I never knew Courtney -- like I knew she played tennis, but I didn't fully comprehend.

So we were at Charli's house one time, and I was like, Nobody can beat me in ping-pong, man. I'm the number one. I'm the goat. Like, Come on. And Courtney was like, I'll play.

So we go out, and as soon as we start, she gets in her

stance. I'm like, Oh, God. I know ping-pong is definitely different than tennis, but she killed me in that and put me in my place.

So go ahead, Courtney.

COURTNEY EKMARK: Oh, gosh. My mom actually played tennis in college. She played at Marquette. My dad loves playing tennis too. We have a tennis court in our front yard. So kind of was in between basketball and tennis, but I love basketball. I did play tennis in high school, though.

CHARLI TURNER THORNE: We're glad you chose basketball.

COURTNEY EKMARK: Foosball, that's Sabrina's.

SABRINA HAINES: Yeah. And soccer. That's me.