

Pac-12 Women's Basketball Media Day

Monday, October 7, 2019

Adia Barnes Tee Tee Starks Aari McDonald Arizona Wildcats



ADIA BARNES: This is going to be the best year for Pac-12 women's basketball. I'm fired up. We all say we're excited, so I'm very excited. But I think that there's so much parity in the league right now, I think it's going to be a great year for the best conference in the country.

Q. Can you reflect on the NIT run and kind of all of it, the things you did to promote the program and get people into the gym? Was it more than you even thought it could be?

ADIA BARNES: It was a lot more than I thought. You know, a lot of people asked me was I disappointed because we didn't make the tournament. I mean, of course you are. You always want to make the tournament. But it was the absolute best thing for our program and where we're at. I mean, going to the NIT, playing six games, ending the season with a win, having momentum carry over to this year, it was the best thing.

I think one of the most rewarding things was seeing how the city just gravitated towards it. They were hungry for excitement with women's basketball, and the crowd just grew every single game. It was fun. We weren't focused on the crowd. People were like, oh, you were marketing, you were doing this and that. No, I was having fun and it doesn't take a lot to tweet, so thank goodness for social media and you guys because it was easy. That was the easy part. It was fun, and we all believed in our room, we believed that we could win, so we were on a mission to win. Like I said, there was two teams that were happy at the end of the year, it was us and Baylor, so that was a pretty good situation to be in.

AARI MCDONALD: Definitely the NIT run was an amazing experience for us like Coach said. We were on a mission, and by that part of the season everyone was bought into what Coach was saying and we played for each other and we came out victorious.

TEE TEE STARKS: It was fun. There was no other way

to explain it but it was fun. It was great to see the whole team just kind of come together and finish strong. People would always tell us that we were a totally different team in the NIT championship than what we started with. It was great to see us grow and finish strong.

Q. Coach, you're always so positive. You have this big smile on your face all the time. It up lifts me personally, and I just want to know, what's your secret?

ADIA BARNES: Well, I'm getting gray hair, so that's not a great thing. But no, I just think that -- I'm definitely a positive person. I think that there's challenges, there's adversity. We all have it. And I think that part of being a role model and being a professional is taking care of your business.

How could I not smile? I go to work every day, I get to wear sweats, I don't have to wear heels every day. I wear sweats and I mentor young women and I coach basketball. So for me, that's a blessing, and there's nothing to take for granted because one day I probably will get fired. Everybody gets fired in this profession.

But I think that I'm in a great situation helping young women, and I think for me that's something to always smile about. Yes, are there highs and lows, yes, but there are in every progression. I'm coaching at my alma mater, I'm doing what I love, I'm in a game that has changed my life, and I'm still part of this game. So I mean, I'm going to smile for a long time because of that. For me, I'm where I want to be. I'm in the right place. I'm at the right place, and I think the timing is right for everything. I think everything happens for a reason.

Q. I want to know what's going to inspire you to take it to the next level next season because I know that's a goal.

AARI MCDONALD: I would say just -- I'll reflect back on last season. I know that the NIT, like we weren't satisfied, so just winning that will make myself and my teammates hungrier for this year, and we're hoping for better things.

TEE TEE STARKS: We spoke earlier, but, honestly, I think about how close we were to getting into the NCAA Tournament. We were a couple games from

getting in, so I think just having those experiences and being able to implement them into this year and kind of handle those situations better, I think we'll be able to accomplish those goals.

Q. Aari, what did you work on this summer to make you even more dangerous this year?

AARI McDONALD: I've been working on my jump shot, just making sure I have a consistent jump shot and just making sure I have like a better shot selection, and like knowing when to push tempo, when to slow down.

Q. Tee Tee, what was behind your decision to stay at Arizona?

ADIA BARNES: Besides me getting the crowd to say one more and having the people carry the ones. That was like part of behind the scenes, so that was an influence a little bit, I'm sure.

TEE TEE STARKS: Yeah, she definitely embarrassed me a little bit. But Coach Adia talked about all the things that we could do this year. I talked it over with my family. I have a really big support system back at home, and this was a decision that I couldn't make on my own. So I relied on the people that I trust, my family, my mom, and we kind of just went with the best decision for me, and that was to be here.

Q. Coach, you look at tremendous talent coming back, and then a really eclectic unique incoming class, kids from all over the world. It would appear from the outside looking in that with great veterans coming back, the freshmen or the incoming class doesn't have to be great right away. Can you massage it a little bit as they learn the ropes of D-I basketball in America?

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, so it's a big cultural transition for a lot of those players. But the returners have to be great right away, and that's their job is to be role models, and their job is to bring the freshmen along. We have seven new players. There is a little bit of language barrier, but I think that's what makes it so special. We're a special group with a lot of different people, and I think that makes them culturally more diverse and more well-rounded.

So I think things will be a little bit slower because there are so many new people. But with everybody back from last year, all the starters back, I think that it's easier for those freshmen not to have pressure to be so great.

The other thing is we have a lot more depth, and I think we're more talented this year. So just shooting the ball a little bit better, not having to play players 37 minutes. So I think efficiency-wise they'll be a little more efficient. I think sometimes there is a little bit -- practices can be a little bit longer because you have to

kind of back-brief a little bit more and talk a little bit more behind the scenes. But I think the one thing it has helped us with a lot is communication, and that's been something we have to work on. And we're not going to get better until we worked on that, so this is a great way to work on that because we have no choice but to do it.

It's funny because it feels so different in practice because having like 11 healthy people last year, now 15, it's like there's no room to run a sprint on the baseline. It feels different. It looks like we have a lot of people, but I'm excited there's 14 eligible players this year. One is sitting out, but I'm excited. I'm excited, too, because they're excited. They've had some success, and the level has been raised. And now the freshmen, we expect more from the freshmen coming in. They can't just say, oh, we're freshmen. They've got to come along faster.

Q. What's it like with expectations higher on your program, period, after what you did last year? Folks are looking at you with a little bit more of a target on your backs.

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, I don't really pay attention to a lot of that stuff. I'm not saying every day we need to make the tournament. That's what we want and that's the ultimate goal, but I believe in getting 1 percent better every day. So every day we're doing our best and we're getting a little bit better. We talk one more, so what's your one more today? That's my one more as a coach, and holding me accountable for that. And I think that by us doing all that and having the small victories, the big things will take care of themselves. I don't feel like there's pressure. I think the climb is the fun part. I think there's a lot more pressure when you're No. 1 and you have to finish No. 1.

Yeah, we're picked sixth, but that doesn't mean a whole lot to me because we've got to go out and play and do better. If I talk to this group, they don't expect to finish sixth. They want to do more, so that's what I love about them. So I am willing to do whatever it takes to help them reach their goals and aspirations.

But really big on little victories and 1 percent better every single day.

Q. Do you feel like being picked sixth is reflective of where you're at, especially after a couple years ago you were picked 11th and 10th?

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, I think it's a lot easier when you're picked 11th and 10th because if you go up one spot, it's a great season. I don't really get into a lot of that stuff because, regardless of where you're picked, you've got to still go out -- this is the best conference in the country. You've got to still go out and play. And I

think whether you're picked second or fourth or 12th, there's really good teams. And I don't think you can take anybody lightly and we have a pretty tough Pac-12 schedule. So I don't really look at that, but I know where we need to be to try to make the tournament. And to be honest our goal is to make the tournament. Yes, winning the WNIT was fabulous, but now we want more, and you always want more after you've had some success. So if we went to another WNIT, it probably wouldn't be a great year for us in our minds and how we feel.

You know, our league is competitive, so we just have to do our best and get better every single game, and I think everything else will take care of itself.

Q. For Adia, you're part of an elite group now, former Seattle Storm player, WNBA championship. Charmin also was with the Seattle Storm.

ADIA BARNES: They were teammates.

Q. That's right, in 2000 --

ADIA BARNES: A long time ago. Don't mention the year.

Q. Since you've become head coach at Arizona and with your background in the WNBA, do you have maybe a former player or former teammates or players that are in the league now reach out to you about coaching, and what has that been like as sort of a full circle moment for you?

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, it happens a lot. I think there's so many -- some of your teammates you're thinking, I would never give you a job. But I think it's just a blessing to be in a situation where you can help people, and so I'm all about paying it forward and giving back and pulling someone else along. So creating opportunities for women I think is a great thing.

I think when you're a player and you're a pro for so long -- I've been in that spot. You kind of come to a crossroads. You've made some money, you've kind of taken naps every day for 10 years, practiced four hours a day, and you get to a point where you're a little older and trying to figure out what you want to do. So I'm always giving advice and helping friends because it's not an easy transition for women because -- it's different with men. When you've played that long, you're financially stable and you don't have to get another job. You can go chill out in Italy on the beach. But when you're a female athlete that's pro, you don't make millions of dollars so you have to transition into something else.

I really take pride in helping friends, and I think this is a great avenue to be around the game, give back, and to

mentor. And I think that there needs to be more former players coaching, and I'd love to see that. So however I can help in any way and give advice and input, I always do. I let people come to practices and talk to me, and I help when they first start getting into the game because I think we need more players in the game to be successful.

Q. With Charmin being at Cal now, what are your thoughts on that?

ADIA BARNES: So I reached out to her when she first got the job, and she had some questions she asked me because very similar situations. When you're turning over a program, it's not easy. It takes a lot of time and a lot of work, and I think Charmin is really cut out to do it. She's extremely smart. She was a great player. She was a great teammate. I think she's a perfect fit for Cal. And I think she'll be very successful. But it takes time. It doesn't happen in one year, it doesn't happen in two years. There are growing pains when you turn around a program.

But I think that I'm happy she got the job because I think she's the right person for the job, in the right place since she was there over a decade. So I was happy to see her in the league, and I just want her to be successful.

Q. I was just wondering, you alluded to the international players and especially with the freshmen coming in. Has that led to any light moments or challenges, stories you can tell about how it's gone?

ADIA BARNES: You know, I think that there was one -- a couple moments. We did something called the program. The program is -- they probably don't love it, but I loved it. It's military-style training, which makes you face a lot of adversity from being in a pool at 5:00 in the morning to log carrying, I guess, as a team. So I think we had some people that don't speak great English step out of their comfort zone and have to lead a group. And I thought that was extremely eye-opening because of a couple things. Not because they said the commands right in the right words, but because the team had to rally around them and really communicate well and have their backs. So I really loved seeing that.

And I think that we really grew as a program, and it's something I plan on continuing to do. I think it showed me a lot about people's character and people that we can mold into leaders for the future. But I think the communication, that was big. And I talked about communication before, but that's one of the areas we had to get better at to go to that next step and get -- just the next level in the program.

But I think some of those moments or just some

translation during practice, and Salvo, who happens to be one of the assistant coaches, he's really good at Spanish, so he can translate and speak a couple different languages, so that really helps. If you have international players and you have a coach on staff that speaks multiple languages, it's definitely helpful.

Q. How many native languages -- different native languages are on the team now?

ADIA BARNES: Well, it's kind of -- that's a little misleading because from Latvia and Iceland, they speak perfect English. So I'd say predominantly Spanish, Turkish, which none of us speak Turkish. But they understand English. It's not that difficult. And then Australia is obviously English, so I think it's just two. So it hasn't been that bad.

But also I think the great thing about our players is they're learning some words in their language. As a team just for a cultural experience, we went to a Turkish restaurant when they first got here. So I think there's things that are valuable that the players on the team are learning, and how to embrace different cultures because that's what America is. That's what life is. And the thing is most of them, they don't understand because they've never been inserted into another culture. But a lot of them aspire to go and play pro. It's going to be the same situation they're going to be in, but it's going to be flipped.

So I think having sensitivity to that and exploring new things and learning about different people, I think that's one of the great things that our sport does, it brings people together.

Q. Are there any plans to auction off Assistant Coach Salvo for tickets?

ADIA BARNES: No, because he might divorce me. No, I thought that was funny and it was a joke, but he didn't think it was that funny. But now I've got to auction off someone else because we won't stay married probably. But yeah, it was to reach a ticket -- it's funny, so I think one of the things you guys talk about momentum from the WNIT. So one of the things is last year we had this big rally trying to go to sell a thousand tickets, so another way that the momentum from the WNIT helped was this year like we're -- we're really close to 3,000 tickets, and 84 percent were new accounts. So new fans for women's basketball, I think that was really good, and I didn't have to auction my husband to get to 3,000. But yeah.

TEE TEE STARKS: Maybe next year we'll auction her off.