

Pac-12 Women's Basketball Media Day

Monday, October 7, 2019



Cori Close Michaela Onyenwere Japreece Dean UCLA Bruins

CORI CLOSE: Well, good afternoon -- is it good afternoon, good morning, something like that.

But just thank you all for being here. We are really excited about this incredible conference and the chance to tell the stories of the amazing young women in this conference, so thank you all for your participation and enthusiasm in growing our game and showcasing these amazing young women.

We are very excited about the upcoming season. We really -- I really love these young ladies and their passion for the game. Our team is going to be versatile. We will continue to be up tempo. I love the way we're shooting the basketball, waiting for them to guard somebody, but a work in progress.

But really like the pieces that we have in place with our basketball team, and really excited about the Pac-12 season ahead.

Q. Japreece, I remember the video from last year when you knew you were going to get to come back, and you're back for your fifth season. What's your anticipation level for in year?

JAPREECE DEAN: Well, on that topic, I really want to thank everyone who was involved in helping me get that year back. That was a great feeling, and I was super excited. Just really the anticipation of this season, I'm super excited, super excited about the freshmen and our returners. And I'm excited about what we're going to do this year. I know we have high expectations. I'm just super excited to play again, so excited would probably be my word, excited.
(Laughter).

Q. I just asked Larry just a little bit on this Fair Pay to Play. How much do you think that could affect the women's game? He expressed major concerns, and I know we're still a few years off from this, but it's sort of a big deal for California. You're a big California institution. Thoughts on that, and does it

blur the lines for pro sports?

CORI CLOSE: You know, I'm a huge advocate for student-athletes and opportunity, and I'm a huge believer in what happens in the lives of young women as a result of being involved in college sports and amateur sports, quite frankly. So I think to be honest with you, I have some more to learn. We actually had a good meeting this morning about it, and I'm learning and educating myself on our campus. It's such a delicate line, right? You want players to have opportunities and you never want to limit opportunities, but you also don't want unintended consequences to maybe trickle down to how it could affect women's opportunities and how it could play out in recruiting circles. And is this good intention to try to reward image and likeness really going to play out to reward that, or will there be some other things that are taken away that are unintended? And I think that's sort of my caution.

But I don't think I'm educated enough yet to really play -- to do a side, but I think it's a complicated issue that we need to think carefully about, and we need to not get sucked up into the momentum of public opinion. But at the same time, listen well, consider well, research well. And my job is always to look out for women's -- and especially women's basketball -- but women in sport in general.

Q. Quick question regarding your incoming class. You've got some wonderful veterans returning, and yet another great incoming class, whether it's the transfer in Natalie and some of your four or five-star kids. Help us understand how quickly they can help.

CORI CLOSE: Well, I'm really thankful for the newcomers to our program. You know, I think that we've really needed some size, and I think Brynn Masikewich has been a huge addition to us already. She's getting healthy a little bit right now, but she has already made a huge impact on our program, and I think that was maybe the biggest surprise I didn't know. It was really fun to be over in Thailand coaching in USA Basketball because I got to watch her in competitive environments and be around her to see how she would transfer over. But I will tell you she has done better than I would even have hoped, and I was pretty excited going in.

Our guard play from Camryn Brown to Jaden Owens

as well as Charisma Osborne, they have really been -- their passion for the game and their confidence -- you never know with freshmen how that confidence is really going to go. And I would say they have been surprisingly confident, and especially Jaden Owens, really using her voice in leadership has been already an impact in our program.

I always say that freshmen will hit the wall. It doesn't matter. It'll be a matter of who can get around the wall, over the wall, through the wall, because it is a hard transition. But I think this group has a chance to really be strong contributors.

And then Natalie Chou, it doesn't feel like she's a new player. Obviously from a public standpoint she is, but she's been practicing hard. And her love of the game, pretty much every day you're going to get her to get 500 shots in before she goes to class, and she's a come-early, stay-late player that wants to do whatever it takes. My biggest thing for her is she loves it so much, she puts so much pressure on herself, and I want her to bring the joy. She has so much creativity in her game, and I think the more joy she brings to what she's doing, I think the better she's going to play, and she's going to be a tremendous asset for our program.

Q. Michaela, last year earlier in the season you hit a stretch -- you were in transition after Jordin and Monique, and you guys hit a little bit of a wall and you had to put it back together. Are you confident that the early part of this season you guys aren't going to be in that same position?

MICHAELA ONYENWERE: I think that last year that was kind of the story for our team was just finding our new identity after Mo and Jordin left. So I think last year we did find our identity. And I think that yes, we had a great season last year and we're going to look at that as a great season. But I think now coming into the season that we know our identity and we're going to find our new roles or new teammates, new freshmen, and we're going to be really, really good this year.

Q. What is that identity?

MICHAELA ONYENWERE: I think last year, like I said, that identity was finding our identity. And now that I think that we've kind of implemented it, I think that this year we're great rebounders, great shooters. We work well together, great teammates, and so I think that last year kind of helped us find that new identity.

Q. Cori, I was wondering what you remember about the triple overtime game with Arizona last year and if you thought they'd be capable of going on to winning the WNIT and looks like now they're being predicted to being kind of middle of the race?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I just give Adia so much credit.

Not only did she get her team playing their best basketball in March, but she rallied an entire community to get behind that team in a really special way. We all need to celebrate that because that's growing our game and growing enthusiasm for the journey of women's basketball.

I think that that triple overtime game, that weekend was our turning point in the season. So going to Arizona State and being able to come with a win, a great shot in a clutch moment by Japreece Dean in that game and then to respond a couple days later with a triple overtime win against a very, very good Arizona team, I think it was -- for our building process, it was really important for our mentality. But I'll tell you, they earned our respect by the way that Arizona played, by the way they competed. Neither team could stop each other in crucial moments. We were thankful to come out on top, but definitely earned our respect.

And we're excited for where that program is going, and I think that's really the key to our conference. There's a lot of attention given to the top of the conference, but the way that our entire depth of our conference has been risen up, and Arizona is a big part of that, I think that's a major story line in why our conference is the best in the country.

Q. Coach, kind of following along those lines, you're one of four teams that's projected to be potentially preseason top 10 this year. How do you see the depth in this conference compared to previous years?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think, like I said, that is the story line, and I think obviously Stanford has been the torchbearer for a long time in terms of consistent level of excellence. And obviously Oregon and Oregon State have earned a lot of attention and are phenomenal basketball teams. But I think we've had really good teams in the past at the top, and I think what differentiates our conference this year is the depth of excellence.

And I think we're going to have eight teams vying to be in the NCAA Tournament and maybe more than that. But I think that truly the depth of the conference -- if you go along any other conference and you look at what are the differentiators, the top -- there's a lot of really good teams in the top of the other Power Five conferences, but I don't think anybody has the depth from top to bottom all the way through that we do.

Q. Cori, you guys -- you can all weigh in if you'd like. You mentioned that pivotal weekend against Arizona. But going into Eugene and handing them their only home loss of the season, what did you draw from that? I understand Ruthy was hurt and

blah blah. You still had to win there with a hostile environment, et cetera, et cetera. If you guys could help us understand maybe there was a moment where you looked at each other and said, you know, we can hang with anybody in this country. And it played out as you made the great run in the NCAA Tournament. If you could talk about that win.

MICHAELA ONYENWERE: I think playing in Matthew Knight arena, it's a crazy, crazy atmosphere, and I think that night it was a testament to how hard we worked as a team. We were down 22 at one point, and I don't think there was one point where we ever gave up. I think that speaks a lot to our character as a team and how the coaching staff has instilled in us what our values are. And I think that just kind of shows to our identity of what kind of team we were last year.

CORI CLOSE: I think one of the biggest lessons we learned last year as a program coming into this year is to not let anyone on the outside determine what we can do and what our identity is, and if you're not distracted, you can accomplish anything. And that's why we became really, I think, a very good road team is that we really limited distractions. We have a phrase in our program that says, "performance equals potential minus interferences," and I think that really learning as a program how to minimize interferences -- because when you go into Matthew Knight arena as Michaela referenced, it's a great environment. How fun to compete in. They have earned that support of that community, and what a challenge.

But our job is minimize those interferences. Our job is to look each other in the eye and to know what we need to do possession by possession. And that's easy to talk about, hard to build into your psyche, as well as into your habits. And I think they actually taught me about that, I think, last year, the power of that. They reminded my coaching heart about how powerful that can be, and that's something I want to continue to teach, and that's why that was a great win, but also a reference point going forward to what mentality can do.

Q. For Cal and for the conference, Charmin Smith had left in the spring to join a WNBA team and come back. For Lindsey to go to the WNBA, what does it mean for Cal but also for the Pac-12 that Charmin comes back here and is one of the new faces in the conference?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think we get to be a part of two special things in that, right? That Lindsey is blazing a trail for women as the way she embarks into her NBA journey and fulfills a childhood dream and maybe blazes a trail for other people to walk in in the future or more people to walk in. And then we get to keep one of our own at home, somebody who has invested and sacrificed not only as a coach but also as a player in

her time in the Pac-12.

I have a lot of respect for Charmin, not only as a basketball coach, but as a human being that wants to invest and use sport as an opportunity to invest and progress the lives of women. And I think she has a great passion.

I had the opportunity to serve on the WBCA board with her and to see her wisdom, to see her vision, even in our coaches' meeting this morning. I just think it's a tremendous asset to keep her home in the Pac-12 footprint, and I think she's going to do a great job. And I'm really thankful that she's involved and I'm thankful for the trail that Lindsey is getting to blaze for the rest of us, as well.

Q. Japreece and Michaela, you came from another state to play in Los Angeles. I know Coach just talked about distractions, but I wanted to know what you've been enjoying about Los Angeles? Does your team have a restaurant they like to go to? Or is the beach a big deal? I'm just really interested in that part.

JAPREECE DEAN: Well, for me, I think that hanging out with my teammates is probably the best part of being in LA. I don't really have too many outside friends outside of my teammates. But I would say our go-to restaurant is the Boiling Crab. We go there pretty often. They've kind of changed the menu, so it's kind of messing up our pockets. But we go there pretty often and a lot of people love crab on our team, so yeah.

MICHAELA ONYENWERE: I'd also have to agree with Japreece. Coming from a different state, you don't really know the city and all the new people, but I think my teammates have made it a really easy transition. We have some of the funniest people on my team, so I think it's always a great time. From the Boiling Crab trips to just being around each other, it's always such a great experience.

CORI CLOSE: Aren't you a beach kind of gal?

MICHAELA ONYENWERE: Sometimes, sometimes. The sand kind of gets me, but I do like going to the beach if it's with my teammates. But yeah, I love hanging around with my teammates. They're just great people to be around.

Q. Japreece, I wanted to ask you, you got this extra season. What benefit do you think you can bring with that extra year of knowledge and that extra year of experience and maturity?

JAPREECE DEAN: I think, like you said, knowledge and experience is going to help me mentor and lead the younger class. I know we've got two guards, two

point guard-ish guards in, so I think that's going to help me and it's going to keep me present. And I think about the future, so I think it's going to help me lead them more instead of thinking about what I'm going to do next.

Q. Cori, is there a team that you think is particularly -- you were talking about the depth of the Pac-12. Is there a team or a couple of teams that you think are particularly overlooked or underestimated?

CORI CLOSE: Well, I think Utah is one of those teams. I think Lynne Roberts does such a great job, and I think what they're building and their ability. And I love the way that Salt Lake is coming alongside of them, as well, as their attendance numbers have really grown. But they're a team that comes to mind right off the bat.

But I just -- I mean, I'm looking around the room in our coaches' meeting this morning thinking, man, I get to compete with all of these coaches, and I think that is something -- we always talk about as a coaching group that you'd better adjust because the coaching group here is going to force you to be on your A game, and I think that all of them have made me better.

So I think that's what is leading to that depth. But Utah is definitely one that comes off the top of the head in that group that could really make a surge. I think they proved that in how they played at spurts last year. Obviously Arizona is really exciting to think about with their NIT championship, and we can really identify with the impact that has on a program. That was a huge turning point for us in 2014 -- or I guess the 2014-15 season where we won the NIT -- and really spurred us on and really taught us how to win.

I think those are teams that come to mind right away, but I think there's many teams that could make that kind of run. I mean, you look at what Washington did in the tournament, and there's just a lot of really well-coached teams with really excellent players that know how to make plays. So that's what brings the excitement of this incredible conference.

Q. What's your biggest takeaway from your USA Basketball experience?

MICHAELA ONYENWERE: I had the opportunity to participate in the USA 3-on-3s basketball realm, and then I also was on the Pan-American team which went to Peru, and I think they were both really great experiences. It took me to Russia, to Canada, obviously to Peru, Brooklyn, like all over, so it was a really great experience.

As far as what it's going to teach me, I think it's a little bit different as far as like bringing back what I learned,

because it is just so physical in the international realm. It is so aggressive, and that's something that was definitely an adjustment period coming from college.

So for the Pan-American team, I would say just working hard. I think that's kind of what got me to being able to be on the Pan-American team, and I think that's something that we talk about, too, in our program. So just working hard, having fun while doing it, doing the right things, and yeah, so I think that's probably what I learned.

CORI CLOSE: And she won't say this, but I think her IQ has just skyrocketed because she already studies the game all the time. When she watched film with Coach Tony every week -- and she'd already watched it twice by the time she got to her film session with Coach Tony. But then having to learn not only different systems in terms of the Pan-American games, but then an entirely different game in 3-on-3, I just see the way she's talking about the game, and I don't even think she realizes how much her basketball IQ has increased by those experiences, but I think that will pay dividends in our preparation over time.