

Pac-12 Conference Basketball Media Day

Tuesday, October 25, 2022

San Francisco, California, USA

Washington State Cougars

Coach Kamie Ethridge

Charlisse Leger-Walker

Bella Murekatete

Women's Head Coach



they're prepared to lead us this year.

Q. For the players, what's changed in terms of what you view as success in this program, how you think others view you in terms of expectations? How much have you felt that change over the last two or three years?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: First of all, thanks to the Pac-12 just the office and everybody that puts this on. Thank you for being here, the media. It means the world to us, and obviously it's a big deal for me to present Charlisse and Bella here as representatives of our program.

Couldn't be more excited for them to get to experience a day like this that kind of does it second to none like the Pac-12 does. Really excited about that.

Our team is in a good spot. We're not super healthy, but nothing is too drastic and nothing is going to be long-term health-related. If this is the time to be a little bit injured and banged up, I'm happy for that.

Charlisse has been able to -- she's been out of the country the last two weeks, so we've had to learn how to play without her on the floor, which hasn't been the most fun thing to do, but we're excited to get here back into our routine and our team.

I do think it's probably been very beneficial for a lot of our players to have to do a little bit more and be depended on a little bit more with her being out of the gym.

I think the big question for us is have we replaced Krystal Leger-Walker, and I would just say no, but I do like a couple of freshmen that are standing, Pat, and are going to be surprises to you when we get to playing in the PAC.

I think we're in a good spot. I know there's excitement. Our two best players sitting right here in front of you were our two hardest workers this summer, and they improved the most.

So really excited about their leadership and what they've been doing and just their growth in their game and how

CHARLISSIE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, I think in terms of how we view success now, over the past two years, obviously we weren't regarded or ranked in the highest ranks or anything like that. So I think we've really been trying to establish more of a winning culture. Over the past two years we've really started doing that, trying to bring that culture into the gym this year has been good. We bring back a lot of our core players and all of us collectively buy into that mindset.

It's just how we can go about bringing our new players into that mindset, as well, and really giving them the confidence to be a part of a successful culture.

I think, yeah, going into this season, we have set high standards for ourselves, and we have goals that we want to achieve, and getting back to the tournament and making a run in the tournament is definitely one of those goals.

BELLA MUREKATETE: Yeah, like Charlisse said, we want to change Pullman as a basketball school, as a play style women's basketball wants to come and play and go to the tournament every year and go farther than the first round and just keep the tradition going.

Q. Charlisse, only one Kiwi has ever played in the WNBA; how important is it for you to get there, and what are you doing to -- in regards to your game to achieve that?

CHARLISSIE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, I've actually met Megan. She played with my mom, so it's a pretty cool legacy that she has, especially back home. She's definitely on a big pedestal and a lot of girls like myself growing up saw that as kind of the peak that New Zealand players want to get to.

Personally for me, it's been a big goal of mine for a while, probably even before I came to college, and so now that I'm getting probably closer to that stage, I've really been just trying to focus on developing my game in as many areas as I can, being versatile, which playing under Coach E, she really allows us players to do that.

She doesn't just put us in one box and have one role for us, which has helped my game a lot. But really honing in on those skills, making sure I'm working on my perimeter game, my mid-range, obviously finishing at the rim, but also playing on both sides of the court I think I have to improve on a lot, especially defensively, being able to guard players who can score at all levels as a challenge that I'm looking forward to working on, especially these next two seasons.

I think just kind of having more of a mindset of if I want to reach that level, I really have to lock into all of those things and just continue to do that day in and day out.

Q. Kamie, right out of the chute you said these two have improved tremendously. From a coach's vantage point, if you could give us the lowdown on that. And Bella, from your perspective, you say, okay, here's what I need to work on according to Coach. What did you want to work on according to you?

BELLA MUREKATETE: According to me, over the summer I worked on being in shape. I worked on being physical, I worked on all my shot, and I worked on just being more explosive. Not just being a typical post, but also worked on my handles and everything.

You guys are going to see a different Bella. Explosive, can shoot, and just can run more than three, four minutes.

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Well, first, I told the story a little bit about Bella -- sorry, Bella, but I'm going to say it again. I think our strength coach had to Bella-proof the weight room because she was cheating reps. And so he came up with a new system and the whole group had to count to make sure Bella was at the station and started.

Had to change that just to Bella-proof it, and that was all the way after the season last year. And I don't know when it happened. April maybe? Still in that period. She changed, and she got serious about the weight room. She was beyond -- just got committed there, and it transferred over to the court when we sent them home with workouts that she was able to do on her own, the conditioning she committed to do on her own.

She came back early so that she could get workouts in. I mean, just real, real -- lightbulbs have always gone on at

different points in her career, but they really came on, and it was her-directed. Like she was motivated to do them and did them without someone watching over her, and I think that's when real transformation can happen.

These two worked harder. Charlisse committed to staying with our program this summer instead of going home and playing on national teams that she could have done and wanted to really work on certain phases of her game. I think her three-point shooting -- I'm hoping and believing because of the work that she's put in is going to be a big improvement, and I think when that happens, she even becomes harder to guard.

I think that makes her very much more prepared for the next level.

But again, they were here the most. They were the most consistent. They didn't take days off. They worked on their fitness. They worked on their bodies. They worked on their games. They don't need to be begged. You don't have to beg them to go to the gym. They're just wanting to be there because they're wanting to be great. They lead by example, and they did all summer long, so that's what makes me really, really confident in the leadership of our team.

Q. Bella, I'm curious as the first Rwandan player to make the Division I level and someone who's played for the national team, how have you seen kind of the sport grow not only in your country but in Africa overall? I know there's been emphasis on Basketball Without Borders in Africa and developing talent in the continent of Africa.

BELLA MUREKATETE: Yeah, absolutely. It's exciting. As an African kid you grow up playing soccer and maybe volleyball, but basketball is not a huge thing back home, but just in Africa in general.

So just seeing that basketball traveling all over the world, especially in Africa, it's exciting. Also just inspiring and just makes me excited to keep making more histories and wanting to inspire the next generation, as well.

Q. You talked a little bit about it in your opening statement, but with Krystal gone, how do you take some of the pressure and the scoring responsibility off of Charlisse? She's such a high-usage player. Who are the people you can rely on when Charlisse isn't in the game or when defenses are focusing on her to help you guys score a little bit easier besides her?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: She will always be in the game, so just keep that in mind. Yeah, I do think if we look at our

team in the past, we just asked Charlisse to do too much.

Losing Krystal, I keep saying it, is the leadership void that she provided. Defensively, gosh, she was just -- I mean, she was so good defensively.

That I don't know if we can replace, although I think Charlisse's voice -- she's always been the smartest player in the gym and has the best IQ in the gym and knows what to say, and she always has in her career, because really Krystal and her are far enough apart that she was the leader.

So now she's just gone back into that role, her leadership role, her voice. I think that's going to take the place of what Krystal was, which is comforting as a coach.

We need to get easier baskets in transition. We need to find ways to do that, and that means maybe getting different people on the block. I think Charlisse is someone we need to be on the block at times because she's such a good play maker. Tara Wallack is a tremendous player; had a great summer; is going to be big factor for our team.

And then if we can get some easier points that way, I think that helps us. And I think the biggest thing to surround Charlisse is to get four, at least four people in double figures, and we haven't come close to that in the past.

I think the one sitting next to her is a no-brainer; she'd better be doing it. And then I think we do have the personnel now to get at least four people in double figures, and to me that takes a load off of Charlisse.

And we do. We have to be able to take the load off of her at times and not make her be Wonder Woman every night out.

Q. Charlisse, I was reading a lot over the summer to some extent about your sister, but you stay here when she goes back and signs and plays in -- forgive for the probably terrible Maori -- but plays in Taihi back home. To see that league grow from basically nothing this summer into what it is, what was it like watching it from afar and even knowing that hey, this can be a place that I can potentially go down the road if need be?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, the Taihi League, you pretty much said it, it's just pretty amazing to watch that league kind of come out after so many years of not really having a professional women's league at all in New Zealand.

I think being able to see all of the girls back home who are

able to play make money playing basketball, that's never been a career for New Zealanders at all, for women at least.

I think it's a pretty cool opportunity. It makes it more exciting back home to watch. Krystal obviously did great. I think they just lost in their final in that league, but just the level of competition now being played at home is just amazing for younger girls coming through playing basketball.

The opportunities they have, I think it'll give them a lot more exposure, and it just inspires more girls to play basketball, which I think is huge, especially back in New Zealand.

Q. Bella, you have the option to play next year as a super senior; will you?

BELLA MUREKATETE: Yes. Yes, I will.

Q. I know you want to stay and play because you want to play in the WNBA. Who are your favorite WNBA players?

BELLA MUREKATETE: The past championship I was really watching A'ja Wilson. I've really been trying to get my game to look like hers, and I love everything she's been -- how she plays, how she carries herself off the court, everything about her. I just love everything about her and I just want to be like her or better.

Q. Charlisse, you have WNBA aspirations as well. I know you've worked hard on the three-point shot. Who do you mold your game after in the WNBA?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: Yeah, for a long time I've really watched and admired Sue Bird and how she plays. Obviously she's a true point guard. Her ability, her decision making, she makes just everybody around her look good. I think she does it with a poise and more of a calm demeanor than some other players, and I think that's really a big part of my game that I try to have on court, as well, is just that poised and calming effect for the team because personally I know that helps my team a lot, just brings everyone back down and just kind of helps them throughout the game.

So yeah, Sue Bird I would say definitely has always been a big role model for me.

Q. Does that mean you want to play the point?

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: I mean, I'll probably play some 1 this year.



BELLA MUREKATETE: She can play the 1, 2, 3, the 4 and 5.

Q. Your team put together such an impressive regular season. Last year 19 wins, the most in program history but fell just short when it came to both tournament play in the Pac-12 and NCAA. What do you feel like are some takeaways that will help your team get to the next tier this season?

KAMIE ETHRIDGE: Yeah, I think that's a great question. Who knows, I'm probably not smart enough to figure it out. You want to be playing your best basketball at the end of the year, and I think we've probably logged too many minutes at times during just how hard the Pac-12 is. I think playing three games due to COVID really probably stretched us a lot in those times when we probably didn't need the games but played and didn't get the rest that you might need during the week.

I think playing shorter benches sometimes -- people helped us win games, though, so I'm not sure the trade-off. I'm not sure we win games if I go too deep in my bench at times if they're not at the level. If the bench isn't of the level they will be playing long minutes this year, as well, so we might as well get that out there.

I think what I said before, we just didn't have enough offensive scoring power. We didn't shoot the three good enough. I think we run good stuff. I think we get quality looks. But I think they're going to stop Charlissee's drives, and I think they're going to double-team Bella, and they're going to plug the floor, and we have to be able to make threes, including Charlissee, and I think if that happens, the game becomes easier for us, and again, I think you've got to be able to put more than -- we lost to a team that scored 51 points.

We've got to be able to put more points on the board, and again, I think that's why we want to run a little bit better in early offense, and again, I think the summer has proven that we've begun to shoot the three a little bit better, and I think that will help us more than anything go deeper into the tournament.

Q. For both of the players, since you're from overseas, what blew you away the most moving to Washington State in was it the weather or the wildlife? Have you seen any bears or raccoons or real life cougars?

BELLA MUREKATETE: There's actually squirrels all over the place. It's crazy. But the weather, we get four seasons, so it's pretty cool. I get one season back home in Africa, just get summer, that's all. But you get winter, fall,

spring and summer. That's pretty cool.

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: I would say we get four seasons back home, so not that, but probably the biggest change or difference for me would be the food.

BELLA MUREKATETE: Oh, yeah.

CHARLISSE LEGER-WALKER: You don't get kumara back home or any of the native foods, so I miss that when I'm here.

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