

Pac-12 Conference Basketball Media Day

Wednesday, October 26, 2022

San Francisco, California, USA

California Golden Bears

Coach Mark Fox

Joel Brown

Lars Thiemann

Men's Head Coach



JESSE HOOKER: We're happy to welcome California head coach Mark Fox and student-athletes Joel Brown and Lars Thiemann to the stage.

Coach, we'll turn to you for brief opening remarks and then we'll go to questions.

MARK FOX: I feel like Johnny Carson, if you guys are old enough to remember who that is, sitting up here. These guys don't even know who that is.

It's good to be back, to see everybody, and we're excited about our team. Our summer wasn't perfect, but I think we challenged them to continue to grow.

So we improved throughout the off-season. We have a lot of new faces that I think have impacted our team already. We're excited to get started.

I have two terrific representatives today with me. They've been a pleasure to coach, and I'm excited for their fourth year this year. So we'll open it up to questions.

Q. Mark, what have you learned from the scrimmages you've had so far? I guess the big question is where does the scoring come from this year?

MARK FOX: We have to be a team. I think that we have essentially six new players, five that did not play last year and then one that played very little. I think all six will impact our rotation.

Our scoring is going to have to be as a group. It's going to have to be by committee. I think that in a rebuild sometimes you can appear a little one-dimensional because you don't have enough guys who can score. The best teams spread it out, and I think hopefully we'll be a

team that can spread our scoring across the lineup.

Q. Kind of a follow-up to that question. You've got a lot of new faces. Last year you were short in rotation, injuries, other factors. How do you see the rotation playing out a little bit, and what kind of tempo can we expect this year with that slightly deeper rotation?

MARK FOX: These guys will echo this. We have a lot more guys, so the competition in practice has been tremendous. I'm not going to say that we're going to play 10 or 11 guys, but in practice we have 10 or 11 guys that are getting after it, and we've had to play obviously a little slower since we came because we didn't have the depth.

The guys who we did have were undersized, and now we have, I think, legitimate size at every position. We have depth at every position. So we would like to play a little faster, but as all the ex-coaches know, you can only play as fast as you can play well.

There's days that we play a little faster than we can play well in practice. But I think it's a group that can pick up the tempo a little bit, and we're excited to have more guys.

Q. Just for Lars and Joel, you've been here now for four years, taking kind of those incremental improvements. What are you aiming for coming into this season to take that next step? And also are you welcoming more of a leadership role?

LARS THIEMANN: Yeah, for sure it's been like four years with Coach Fox now. We've been working hard, and this is our senior year, me and Joel, Kuany as well who's been here for four years, and now it's our time.

I'm very confident in our team. I'm very pleased with how things are going. Obviously the goal is always to win the NCAA Tournament. We just hope all goes well.

JOEL BROWN: To follow up, with the new guys we brought in, like Coach has spoke about, it's definitely helped our team depth-wise and what we can do and bring on a daily basis, both offensively and defensively.



In regards to leadership, definitely taking that new step, especially in my fourth year helping out the younger guys understand the offense, just kind of understand just the little things and the importance of how to get onto the floor and win games.

So I've definitely taken that upon myself this year to be that guy.

Q. Mark, if you could talk about the two guys next to you, I think it's fair to say when they got to Cal they were not finished products. How much better are those two gentlemen now than what they were, say, 3 1/2 years ago?

MARK FOX: I say first every player needs a great example to learn from. I think that the value of having a great example to learn from is often understated.

The other day we finished practice, and we have two freshmen big kids, and I ask them, hey, what are your thoughts? Well, Lars has been terrific in helping show us the way. I don't know if they necessarily had those examples when they came in, Joel and Lars, but they've continued to open themselves to coaching. They have both changed physically. They're both obviously more mature as people.

But their games have improved. What did you make, 48 out of 50 free throws the other day? They've improved incrementally from year to year, and that's one of the things that's important in any program, is to have development.

I think Lars showed last year at the end of the year how much he's improved, and he's a way better player today than he was then.

So really proud of their commitment to the process, because it's not an easy road when you go through a rebuild. Somebody has to go through the hard years, and these two guys, along with Kuany have signed up for that, and never wavered in getting our program back to where we want it to be.

Q. I've got two questions, one for Mark and one for the players. For Mark, just talk about the guys you added in the transfer portal, Dajuan Clayton, Devin Askew. Just wondering how you approached the transfer portal this off-season. For the players, talk about your majors and how you chose them. Lars, you're a nutritional science major, and that's the first one I've seen with that major. So just talk about why you chose the majors you did and balancing a student-athlete with academics being so rigorous.

LARS THIEMANN: I'm going to answer your question regarding nutritional science. I always loved science classes. I always loved cooking. I think it's very important, especially as an athlete, that you know how to fuel your body.

To get that U.C. Berkeley education, which is not easy -- I've had a lot of rough classes, a lot of days when I was studying from the morning to the evening. But I'm very happy, I still enjoy it, and I think that's some knowledge I'll be able to transfer to my personal life to me being an athlete and obviously when I finish college here.

JOEL BROWN: For me with the business, I've always kind of been a math guy. So I've always wanted to stick around numbers. I understood that being a part of Haas is very special and kind of hard to get into. So that was a barrier as a student-athlete I wanted to break, especially on the men's basketball team.

So I was able to accomplish that, and it's definitely helped me because I've been able to network outside of basketball, outside of people who are student-athletes.

So I've actually grown a lot and actually learned a lot in a lot of the classes I've been in. Like Lars said, there's been a lot of studying and whatnot, but at Cal it's just great because we have a lot of resources we're able to use as long as you ask questions.

For me personally in my four years it hasn't been too hard, as many would probably expect, but I've enjoyed it the whole time since I've been there.

MARK FOX: Joel's brilliant, so school is not as hard for him as maybe it would have been for me. And Lars, as a nutrition major, has still not cooked me one thing. He hasn't even brought me a snack.

In regards to our transfers, we did add Dajuan Clayton, who played most of his career at Coppin State. Dajuan is a very versatile guard who can play a couple different places. He scored over 1500 points in college. He has great instincts on the floor and is mature, and I think has been a terrific addition.

Devin Askew joins us, and Devin is a big guard who can play a couple different places. He has the versatility also. I felt like Devin, we needed to get him in peak physical shape. I think he probably added too much muscle and was playing a little too big. So we've slimmed him down a little bit.

And both of them have joined our team with the attitude that they're joining the team, not that the team is joining

them. It really has created a real harmony within our group, and it is probably the most enjoyable team I've had to coach on a daily basis in well over a decade.

Q. If you were playing Davis tonight, who would be your starting five?

MARK FOX: Well, I think Lars would like to play a little bit at the two, which we're not going to let him do that although he did fire a three up yesterday which looked pretty good.

I would tell you this, like every day is different. Every day it's a little bit different. Like today, Joel is the best point guard on the floor yesterday. I think he was terrific. He'd probably start at the one.

Lars would probably start at the five, although the day before he wouldn't have been. We have great competition.

So I think we would lean towards the guys who have experience, but I'll tell you, it's been a lot of fun to have the balance in lineups where every guy has to show up and fight every day otherwise he's getting beat out.

I think that competition has really elevated our team. I don't want to dodge your question because I don't know the answer. If we had to play tonight, I'd probably put the most experienced guys out there.

Q. How have the young guys, Grant and ND, come along through the preseason?

MARK FOX: I don't want to put too much pressure on either one of them, but they've been terrific. Grant Newell had the best summer of anyone on our team. He was outstanding. He has a real poise and maturity about him. So he's been off to a good start.

He's gotten everyone's attention on the team with how he played, so now it's harder for him because he's getting the focal part of everyone's effort.

ND Okafor is a guy who has a lot of athletic ability and talent, and we're trying to challenge that. Lars has been a great example for those two young guys to learn from, and I think they both will impact our team and be in the rotation.

Q. Joel and Lars, when you see the preseason poll come out and you're picked 11th, how does that strike you? What's a thing about this team that might surprise people this year? Either a thing or a person that might surprise people?

JOEL BROWN: The preseason rankings, it's nothing new. Everyone has their own opinions. The one thing is a lot of

people don't know about the guys that we have.

To Coach's point, we have a lot of depth and versatility. We have a lot more athleticism. In my four years, this is probably one of like the better teams with talent and IQ.

At the end of the day, it just comes down to playing hard each night and playing defense, which is what's going to help us separate from other opponents, which is getting stops on that side of the ball, and the offense itself will take care.

LARS THIEMANN: We've got the depth this year. We brought in a lot of new great guys. I feel like the fortitude have helped us really develop a brotherhood and develop the team chemistry we need. We all have belief that we're going to win.

So just this mindset, this winning mindset, I feel like it's going to make a big difference for us.

Q. Coach Fox, you mentioned at the beginning it was a challenging summer for you. Can you talk a bit more about that? Was that part of the European Tour or anything you learned or enjoyed about the European Tour?

MARK FOX: No, it's about changing the maturity of a group. Everyone gets up and says, oh, we had the most glorious summer ever. How many times was I -- I pushed you this summer. It wasn't all just ice cream and balloons. We got after it, and I challenged them because I think they have ability.

But we needed to mature, some of them as young people, some of them as competitors, but we pushed them. We pushed them to a place where they were uncomfortable at times, but that's how you get good.

These guys haven't been afraid of a challenge, and they've really welcomed the expectations that we have for them because no one rises to low expectations. So we have high expectations within our locker room, and this summer we held each other to that.

Q. Your philosophy with international recruiting, I know you've got a couple right there. And I'm also curious, Joel and Lars, what your guys' thoughts were before you were recruited and got the opportunity to come and play? When did you start thinking about maybe I can go to the United States and play basketball?

MARK FOX: Well, I think internationally, our institution has a very international flavor, and there's a lot of successful

international students on our campus. So these guys, I think, as we recruit them, feel immediately comfortable.

A lot of these guys come in with terrific upbringing in the classroom, so the transition to the Berkeley education, it's challenging for everyone, but a lot of these guys have been so well versed as they came up in their home countries, that the transition has been smooth for them.

But it's a place where international guys fit, and these guys have been terrific. I think we have six international players on our team, and you wouldn't know it if you didn't have the roster in front of you, but the game has become very global.

You helped with the Dream Team years ago. The game has a lot of good players in a lot of places. As we rebuilt, guys that could qualify to get in and were good enough players that bought into what we were doing, there was certainly an international flavor to some of that.

JOEL BROWN: To answer your question about just like knowing when I was going to come, just growing up as a kid, I've always wanted to play at the highest level collegiately, and that was Division I.

So growing up watching guys like Andrew Wiggins and Jamal Murray kind of take that step up, leaving Canada and playing prep school was something I always followed.

So I was able to do that. So I knew that coming to America was kind of the best decision. Obviously at a young age it's different having to leave your friends and family, but it was a sacrifice I was willing to make. Luckily it's brought me here, and I'm blessed. I'm getting a scholarship at a great institution. I'm playing basketball in a great conference with great players under a great coach.

So for me, it's just always been a dream. Now I'm just kind of living it right now in the moment.

LARS THIEMANN: Yeah, my journey has been a little different because I've never really been to the U.S. before I came to college, before my visit actually. So NCAA wasn't really on my radar for a lot of my youth playing basketball, and I made a big step in the last year before I came to college.

So that was really when I got recruited by these coaches. I took the visit. I really loved it. Getting a Berkeley degree here and playing in the Pac-12, having this great competition is a no-brainer for me, and I've been really enjoying it.

JESSE HOOKER: That's all we have time for. Appreciate

you being here today, and best of luck this season.

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