

Pac-12 Conference Basketball Media Day

Wednesday, October 26, 2022
San Francisco, California, USA

Utah Utes

Coach Craig Smith

Marco Anthony

Branden Carlson

Men's Head Coach



play very, very soon.

And three freshmen we're very excited about. Will Exacte, who played at the NBA Academy for Montreal. And Keba Keita who played for Wasatch. And Luka Tarlac is from Serbia, very good friends of Lazar Stefanovic.

Really, really excited. We knew we had to upgrade in say lot of areas. Mainly our athleticism and our size, and then getting guys that are more athletic with size that bring physicality and play with force.

Certainly if you come to a practice or a workout, I think you'll see that in full force. We're excited to get rolling. With that, we'll open it up for questions.

Q. I'll bite, Craig. What's the breakfast club, Branden or Marco?

BRANDEN CARLSON: So the breakfast club is just Marco and I have been getting in the gym before class every day Monday day through Friday, and any time between like 7:30 to 9:30, just whenever we have class that day, just get in before that and get up 100 or so shots each.

Just kind of working on game-like shots at game speed, just trying to get in that extra work.

Q. Craig, last year you were also picked tenth. You said it's going to take a few years to get the players in that you want. Do you feel like this year's roster is more equipped to play in the Pac-12 than it was last year?

CRAIG SMITH: Yeah. I think we're definitely more equipped. What that means, who knows if we'll be the best, but we need to be our best. We certainly have more depth, like we stated.

We returned some guys with some real experience. Marco's obviously in his sixth year, won a National Championship at Virginia, helped us get to an NCAA Tournament at Utah State. Branden's a returning all league guy who is very, very skilled for a 7-footer, or a 6'11" guy. Can do a lot of different things on the floor,

JESSE HOOKER: We're happy to be joined by Utah head coach Craig Smith and student-athletes Marco Anthony and Branden Carlson. Coach, we'll give you the opportunity to make a few brief remarks and turn it over to questions.

CRAIG SMITH: Thank you. We're excited about the team. It's an exciting time of year. Obviously last year was a challenging year for the Running Utes, but we're excited to get this rolling, obviously 12 days away.

Branden Carlson, Marco Anthony with us. They've both been outstanding. Both had really good summers and a great preseason and have done a great job with their leadership, using their voice. Not only talking the talk, but walking the walk, getting in the gym. They have the breakfast club going on. Maybe they can expand on it a little bit.

These guys put the time in. They've worked very, very hard. We have a whole new team. We have eight guys returning. Really excited about all those guys that have returned. They understand our culture, what we're about. I know culture can at times get overused in these types of things, but it matters.

Seen significant growth that way, and our guys understand what it's about and what it stands for and what we're about and are able to talk and teach the newcomers what Running Utes basketball is all about.

Really excited about our new guys as well. We have three transfers that I think will make an impact. Mike Saunders from Cincinnati, who also played at Wasatch Academy. Ben Carlson, originally from Minnesota who played two years at University of Wisconsin. Gavin Baxter from BYU, graduated BYU, coming in and hopefully will get cleared to

which really helped everybody else on the floor.

Lazar Stefanovic, who was a member of the all Pac-12 freshman team. I feel like Lazar has taken his game to a different level. Had a good off season. Gabe Madsen had some injuries he had to overcome, a collapsed lung to be exact, in November and December, and got some meaningful minutes there and was a big part of our rotation in league play.

Jaxon Brenchley is a fourth year guy. Jaxon has clearly taken a step forward. He's been around the Pac-12 for four years.

At the end of the day, Branden, Eli Ballstaedt, and Jaxon Brenchley are the only three guys in our program who have been here for 18 months or longer. There's been a lot of change in a short amount of time with our program and our roster.

It's a great group. We have an attitude that craves improvement. We have a bunch of guys that love the gym. These guys can echo that. They love to be in the gym. They love to compete. They don't just want to play, they want to compete. I think there's a difference in that.

We don't have many guys that are sitting on the fence that kind of love to play one day or kind of love to compete one day and then the next day not so much.

I think we have a group of guys that really want to get in there. I think Marco and B.C. did a great job this summer of organizing things and getting the group together. You know, it's easy to say we have great chemistry right now because everyone thinks they're playing 35 minutes a night.

But for eight returners and eight new guys that kind of come together the way they have, the way they did it, it doesn't always happen this way.

So we'll see if we can continue that when we actually start playing games. The minutes are decided, and you've got to earn those minutes to get on the floor.

We know the University of Utah has a rich tradition of excellence. We know last year wasn't up to the standard. We know we've got to work our hands to the bone to make it happen. But it's an exciting group to be a part of.

Q. I saw on the back of your uniform it says "end racism." I haven't seen that on anybody else's uniform. I thought that was very special. What does it mean to you guys? Is it a school thing, or is it an Under Armour thing?

MARCO ANTHONY: I believe it's just a school thing for us. You know, obviously racism is terrible, and it's something we feel like always needs to be addressed because it's just something that it's been on our patch for quite some time. I feel like it was on --

BRANDEN CARLSON: This will be the third year.

MARCO ANTHONY: The third year it's on our patch. But we feel like this is something that isn't just a trend, but something that needs to just keep being talked about until it's done.

So we just feel like this is a small way to do our part and something that's a big deal. So just continuing to build on that and trying to get to that goal of completely ending it. We're just trying to do our small job.

Q. Coach, you have one of the returning Pac-12 all-freshman in Lazar Stefanovic last year. All five of those guys on the Pac-12 all-conference team are back this year. Just what you see from this returning sophomore corps around the conference, and how you have seen Lazar grow as he gets ready for his second season?

CRAIG SMITH: First of all, the conference, we say to our guys all the time, we're not in only one of the best conferences or leagues in the country, it's one of the best conferences or leagues in the world.

So to be able to play at this level, you've got to be really, really good. You have to have so many things go the way right way.

Then great teams obviously had talent, but you have the right mindset. So when you look across the league, there's so many great teams. It's going to be a different league, no doubt, than it was a year ago.

Then when you talk about -- I don't recall all the members of that all freshman team, but I remember some really, really good ones out there. Lazar is just one of these guys that -- and I think these guys would echo it. He's a very bright person. Like I think he's got a photographic memory. He's very committed to being the very best that he can be, and he's all about the team.

This guy, after every practice, the way he does his -- what's the word I'm looking for?

MARCO ANTHONY: Recovery.

CRAIG SMITH: Recovery, right? He sits there and leans



up against the wall, and his legs are up there for half an hour. He does everything he can possibly do -- eats right, sleeps, meditates. He does all these things. And then he's a gym rat. He's in the gym consistently, not just spending time, he's investing time.

And he truly cares. This is a guy that truly, truly cares about his teammates. He truly, truly cares about winning. And he's all in.

The other thing he's done -- so he's improved his game. His shot looks much more consistent and better. I think the game has slowed down. His decision-making has become a lot better. He's really locked into scouting reports.

And the other thing that coaches always talk about, I think he's using his voice. Like whether it's communication on the floor, but also helping these older guys out and reinforcing what we want and what winning takes and using his voice to help make a difference for all the new guys as well as the returners.

Q. Craig, with the impact of the transfer portal in college basketball today, how much room is left in college basketball for the freshmen who might need a year or two to develop?

CRAIG SMITH: Man, that's a great question. I think every coach is so different now. Some -- I heard this not too long ago. Somebody said it used to be where you build a program. Now every year you've got to build a team.

I guess why coaches would say that or people would say that. Now, I might still be too old school. I think you can really build a program. We're going to recruit freshmen. All three of our guys -- I think these guys would attest to it -- I think they're going to play and play meaningful minutes because they're good enough and they're going to earn that right.

But everybody's different that way, and we're going to still try to get this thing rolling through freshmen and high school guys, bring them in, skill development, develop these guys, really build meaningful relationships with them. What is their vision? Where do they want to be in five years? Where do they want to be in ten years? Is this the right fit? Can we help them attain their goals?

It's an interesting time with the portal. It's easy to sit here and blame. Marco transferred a couple times. B.C. has not. They're both really good people with high character and basketball character.

But I think a lot of it -- it's easy to put it on the student-athlete or the player. I think coaches have as

much to blame on this thing as well. What are you telling them when you're recruiting them? Are you being direct and honest? Is there a need? Do they fit your style? Can they fit in in your city, in that environment? There is so much that comes into this that doesn't always get talked about.

But it is a different time. It works both ways. I think I saw -- somebody told me the other day 29% of men's college basketball players, once they enter the portal, did not go to another Division I school. Sometimes it can be an amazing thing as well. I think Marco is a classic example of that.

So much of it comes down to getting to know these guys, what makes them tick, building a relationship. I think on average in men's Division I basketball, just under five guys per school -- and what, is there 367, I think, Division I teams went into the portal. It's reality. It's part of the deal. But we're always going to try to build this thing through the youth and develop guys through and through.

Not that we won't take a transfer here or there obviously.

Q. Having been in the league a year now, you looked at it from the outside-in, having been in it, what adjustments do you need to make personally for yourself, or what are you looking for in year two now that you've been in the conference?

CRAIG SMITH: Sometimes you need a piece of humble pie. Last year we were served a piece of humble pie. I think the first thing to start fixing things is self-awareness. You've got to be honest and be direct with yourself, first and foremost, and with your staff and certainly with the guys.

Any time you take over a new job, there's a lot of newness that goes on. What are the protocols within the department? Learning a new league. When I went to Utah State, I'd been at Colorado State for five years. I felt like I had a really good grasp for the Mountain West conference. Never been a part of the Pac-12. So it's different.

I think you've always got to look in the mirror. What do we need in terms of personnel on the floor? Do we need to adjust our scheme? Certainly we've made some adjustments that I think will help us on both sides of the ball, on offense and defense.

Then just having a true feel for the league. What does it take to play at UCLA? What does it take to play at Arizona? What's it feel like to play in Oregon, Washington State, et cetera, et cetera?

Then do we need -- without changing everything, how can

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

we help our guys more with skill development? How can we help them be more prepared on the floor? Did we give them too much last year? I could go on and on about this. It's a great question.

So I'm excited. I'm excited about the changes that we've made. I think it will help our team.

Q. Question for players or Coach, whoever wants to take this one. Utah, as you guys know, is a state that loves basketball, crazy about the Jazz and a lot of the college programs in the state are very competitive -- BYU, Utah, Utah State, just a lot of great tradition, basketball tradition across the state, high school through pro. Just talk about what it's like being a part of the state of Utah that loves the sport of basketball as much as it does, and how much does that kind of energize you to be in that kind of environment?

BRANDEN CARLSON: For me, I grew up in Utah, so I was a part of that environment for pretty much all my life. I remember just going to -- I went to like all those schools, Utah State, Utah, BYU, I went to a basketball game of every single one of those growing up. Utah Jazz, went to plenty of those.

So just being -- that was part of the reason why I picked Utah for my college that I wanted to go to. Was just being around that environment, the fan base that was there at the time when I went to games, it was the time they went to the Sweet 16 with Kyle Kuzma, Jacob Hurdle, Delon Wright.

Just being able to play now for this program and having this fan base and these amazing people that come and support us, it was just kind of something special to me and just know that we were continuing to help develop it.

CRAIG SMITH: I'll keep going if I can. It's awesome. They care. Our fan base cares. They live it. They breathe it. They love it. They support it. And they understand good basketball.

As a coach, I have a different perspective, obviously, than these guys have, but I always have wanted to coach. I've had a different path than a lot of people, but I've always wanted to be at a place where it's important to people.

I mean, you look around, what we have to offer, I say it to our guys a lot. What don't we have? So our administration has backed it. We have tremendous facilities. There's so many things that we have from nutrition to mental health, academic support, strength and conditioning, right on down the line. It's tremendous.

As a coach, all you can ask for is the tools of leadership

that are in place. Mark Harlan, our AD, and his administration have been tremendous that way, and now it's on us to go get it done. Whether it's me as a head coach and our staff and our guys to go do it because it's proven to be such a great basketball state.

Like you said, almost every college as well as the Jazz have tremendous tradition of excellence.

Q. Coach, I know you and Marco were together that last Utah State tournament run. By the end of that year, you had that thing down to a solid seven man rotation. How do you think this rotation plays out? Because you did mention minute usage earlier in your intro. How do you see that shaking out without being evolution? And also second part, have you made any redshirt decisions at this point?

CRAIG SMITH: To answer the second part, we have not made any redshirt decisions. Quite frankly, we leave that up to the players. It's their career. We'll be direct and honest, this is what we think. There's still a lot to be determined, which I know sounds crazy with 11 days or 12 days before our first game, but we've had a highly competitive summer and camp in a great way.

Two, Marco was a part of that. In our, I guess it was my third year, your second year, back then you had to redshirt when you transferred, Division I to Division I. Marco was a huge piece of that team doing what we did.

I've never had a seven-man rotation as a head coach until the end of that year. It was a culmination of many things. Injuries, we had a lot of freshmen. Marco was our one transfer that year that played, I believe. All the other guys, we had Rollie Worster was our starting point guard as a true freshman. His backup was another true freshman, Steven Ashworth. We had a ton of youth and inexperience.

It came down the stretch of that year where Brock Miller had some real serious injuries going on, some other guys that kind of falling off a little bit, and we just leaned into our veteran guys, plus Rollie and Steven quite frankly.

I don't want to play like that. We want to play around nine guys, maybe even ten, if we can. I think depth matters. We want to play that kind of game. Bring the Running Utes back to the Running Utes where we can get back up and down. If we're going to run defense to offense, which these guys love, they need to run from offense to defense, which not everybody always enjoys.

To win at this level, you've got to really, really compete, and you'd better have some depth. So it's actually ironic

that you brought that up because I was thinking about that team the other day.

I anticipate this team being much deeper where we can go to a lot of different guys and have the versatility to be able to play a lot of different ways, which you need to do to win at the highest level.

JESSE HOOKER: That's all we have time for. Thanks for being here today and best of luck this season.

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