

Atlantic Coast Conference Basketball Tipoff Media Day

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Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Duke Blue Devils

Kara Lawson

Toby Fournier

Delaney Thomas

Women's Press Conference



great strategy for us at Duke. We want to be exposed, and we want to know what we need to work on so that when we get into conference play, we have an idea, and I think that has built us into a mentally tough team, a resilient team.

We've taken a lot of the lessons from losses we've had in nonconference the last couple of years, and I think it's been a big reason we've been a second-weekend team the last two Marches.

Sometimes in the moment it doesn't feel good, but I think we've grown a lot from the tough nonconference schedule. But this is definitely the toughest one that we've had since I've been at Duke.

THE MODERATOR: Toby, AC rookie of the year, first team. A lot of accolades a year ago. A lot of success. What was that area that you wanted to improve upon to take that next step as a team this offseason?

TOBY FOURNIER: I think we talked about it a lot, especially with Coach Kara. You can't take anything from last year into this year. There's no carryover. I think that's a perfect conversation we've had. At the same time last year kind of gave me the knowledge of what I need to work on this year as a player and then also overall with the team as well.

I think there's a lot of teams we know we need to work on as a team, especially just getting the freshmen kind of more into the game and then also just the new players and the additions on the team as well.

Then, on individual level from last year I know a lot of what I need to improve on. You know, whether that's shooting, whether that's defense. There's a bunch of different things that I need to do in order to get to where I need to be my sophomore year. Yeah, but I'm excited. It gave me the knowledge that I need for this year, freshman year.

THE MODERATOR: Delaney, two questions for you. One, what is the area you focused on this offseason? And then more importantly, you led the team in charges last year. Who is that one teammate that you kind of questioned that you want to slide in front of in practice to

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the 2025 ACC Tipoff Q&A. I'm happy to have Duke join me on the stage. Head coach Kara Lawson. We have Toby Fournier, and Delaney Thomas. Ladies, welcome. Duke's claim to fame, the only team to beat every other ACC team a year ago as well as ACC tournament champions and a Sweet 16 run that puts you, oh, so close to that Final Four. Kara, knowing everything you accomplished a year ago, knowing what you have now, can you give us a prelude of what we should expect from this edition of the Duke team?

KARA LAWSON: I think we're still kind of finding ourselves. It's obviously early in the season, but it's been nice to have a good core of returning players that have an understanding of how we want to play on both ends.

I thought they had a great summer, these two in particular, but also the rest of the team, and have had a great fall. So now it's just building, but I think any time you can have the continuity that we've enjoyed the last couple of years, it helps going into the season, because have you familiarity with one another.

THE MODERATOR: Kara, Baylor, West Virginia, USF, South Carolina, Texas, or UCLA, and LSU. Your team will definitely be battle-ready come ACC play, but can you talk about the science behind your nonconference schedule, if there is a science to it?

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, I think the philosophy is really to get exposed, and I think it's really hard to get exposed in games you win by 60 or 70. So if you are playing a ton of those, then I don't think you know a lot about your team or everything that you need to know about your team entering conference play.

That doesn't mean it's not a great strategy. It's just not a



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take that charge from?

DELANEY THOMAS: Okay, first question I would say the experience. I think definitely the experience. Jumping from sophomore to junior year, it's a big step and just taking that with me, everything I've learned was really important on this offseason.

Then for a charge --

THE MODERATOR: Or maybe you're fearless and there is no one.

DELANEY THOMAS: You know what, sometimes maybe Toby. Maybe Toby.

THE MODERATOR: Why?

DELANEY THOMAS: She's tough. She's coming in fast. She's aggressive. Yeah.

TOBY FOURNIER: And I (indiscernible) too. Get off once and gets a charge on me.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. The question for the players, is there one team or one player that you really want to play this year? Also, one for Coach. Is there a certain coach in the ACC that you look forward to playing every year?

TOBY FOURNIER: I mean, I feel like that's a hard question. With our schedule and the people that we play in our conference, I think that I'm excited for everyone. So I don't think there's really a specific player, specific team. I just P that it's going to be a really competitive season, especially with the schedule that we have lined up for ourselves.

So, yeah, I don't know. Nobody specifically. I'm just excited for the whole season.

DELANEY THOMAS: Yeah, I would have to agree. It's going to be competitive, but I'm excited for it, all of them.

KARA LAWSON: No, it doesn't bother me. We don't really do that much during the games, the coaches, so I don't care who is down there, so...

Q. This is for Coach Lawson. What are the challenges, if there's been any this season, working on chemistry and now with the transfer portal, players coming in and out? How is the chemistry this year, and what's it been like building it this offseason?

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, I mean, we've been fortunate here at Duke. Ten of our 13 players have only ever played at Duke. We're an anomaly in the space in that way and continue to be. That doesn't mean the other ways don't work. It's just what works for us.

We enjoy the connection and the long-term relationships that we have with our players. Even though we have the continuity, you still have to rebuild, like Toby talked about. You start anew each year, and have you to rebuild the chemistry because we do have new players that come in. So we have a group of four first-time players with us. You know, we have two freshmen, and then we have two players that redshirted last year that they're going to put on the Duke uniform for the first time and play a game.

Figuring out how they fit with the players that we already have is how we're trying to build it, and how we try to build that is just day by day. Try to see how they look together, how they fit together, and they're a big part of that, figuring out how to play with one another. How Toby plays with Delaney is going to be different than how Toby plays with Woody or how Toby plays with Arianna. They're having to figure out that chemistry amongst one another as well.

How they play in the ball screen game with Ashlon is going to be different than with T, and it's going to be different than with M. So they're learning each other and it's a process. Hopefully we can get that chemistry where it needs to be.

Q. Losing five members of the back court last year and kind of bringing in Emilee, Riley, Anna, and Hailey, can you talk about how especially on offense how that transition has manifested? The guards are doing a lot of the work kind of facilitating the movement.

KARA LAWSON: Well, I think it starts with Ashlon and T. The fact that we have two players that have been two-year starters as sophomores and juniors that have been through all the battles in the ACC and that have led us as a starting back court to a Sweet 16 and Elite Eight.

So I feel pretty good about our guard play because of what we're starting with.

And then, you know, the other players bring their own unique spin to it. Emilee and Riley are playing really well in practice, and they're showing to be capable two-way players. They both have great positional size as well. I think that's going to help our versatility as a team.

They both can score and they both can pass, which fits how we want to play. So this group is going to be different. In terms of how we play together, I think this group's

overall size as a team -- this is one of the taller teams I've had, but they're also athletic as well.

We'll see how we can leverage that in the games.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, Kara is going into her sixth year now at Duke. Can you kind of describe the coach in practice, defense-oriented, offense-oriented, very direct? Just give us kind of the inside scoop of what makes Kara Lawson so good as a head coach.

TOBY FOURNIER: I think that Kara focuses on everything. Like, it's not just one specific thing that she focuses on as a coach. I think that's really important. You know, we work on defense for a whole practice. Then we go to offense the next practice. That's why our team is very good all-around.

The way I would describe her in practice, I don't think she really changes much from how she is right now. You know, she's very passionate about what she does, and you can tell that she really cares about how we practice and our development. So I think you can see that through the way that she practices and the way she's talking right now as well.

DELANEY THOMAS: I would say Coach is very intentional. I think just the way we're holding ourselves accountable, she wants to get every detail correct. She doesn't let us fall below that standard. She keeps us to a pretty high standard, and that's where we keep it at in practice.

Q. Toby, you talked about not carrying last year to this year. So for any of y'all, have you set any personal goals and then team goals for the season?

TOBY FOURNIER: I mean, I so many special goals I don't even know where to start. Then also as a team, I think it's the same thing. There's a lot of things that I want to accomplish, a lot of things that I want to do with these girls and this team that I know that we're capable of. Yeah, I don't know exactly where to start. I know that overall I want to get better on defense. I want to get better running offensive plays and then also just gel and learning about my teammates as well.

We have people coming back, but we also have new players as well, so it's important to understand the chemistry between us.

DELANEY THOMAS: Yeah, I think personally it's important for me to be what my team needs from me every day, and as a team we just want to go as far as we can go together and just see where it takes us.

THE MODERATOR: Common fans out there think winning is pretty easy; winning is hard. Winning consistently is even harder. For you and all of the success you've had as a head coach, what's the nonnegotiable for you?

KARA LAWSON: Well, I have a lot of them they'll tell you probably. A lot of things that, you know, there's a standard that you have to play at. I think probably the three things I talk about the most with them are their focus, their discipline, and their work ethic.

They have a responsibility. That's an individual responsibility to come in at a high level in those three areas every day to practice. If a player comes in and they're not focused, it's really hard to be a great player. As a team that's full of unfocused players, it's hard to be a great team.

Same thing with discipline and same thing with work ethic. Well, what we talk about is if you have consistency of focus and consistency of discipline and consistency of work ethic, then that leads to consistent results. Not absolute result. Everyone in life wants it to be absolute. You want to do all those things, and you want to -- you think you are entitled to or you have earned the win. Well, both teams do those things.

Both teams can't win. The consistency of those things gives you consistent results. The inverse is also true. The inconsistency of those characteristics will give you inconsistent results.

When people lose or have inconsistent results and they wonder why, it's usually because they have an inconsistent focus, inconsistent discipline, or inconsistent work ethic. That's easy to say sitting up here. That's hard to ask them to do that, because if it was easy to do, then every time would do it, and everybody would be a consistent winner. That's the challenge that we give them daily.

They fight hard to reach that, and then when they don't reach it, it's my job to tell them that they're falling below that line. Not to punish them, not to be mean, but to let them know that there's another level that I'm expecting.

I admire them, because they take on a lot, but they are excited every day to be in the gym, and they're excited to work. They're excited to be held to a standard. That's rare. That's rare these days, and these guys have that.

I definitely admire them for that.

THE MODERATOR: Toby, I want you to speak on Delaney. What makes her such a critical piece of your team's success?



TOBY FOURNIER: Oh, my gosh. I mean, that's something I could go on forever about. I think that Delaney is not only somebody I depend on on the court, but also just, like, a best friend that I depend on off the court as well.

I think the way that we relate to each other off the court really helps with our chemistry on the court. I can speak on sophomore year hasn't happened yet, but freshman year she was always there for me, especially when there was so much to develop and so much to work on in terms of just plays and being a new player, especially in a competitive league like the ACC.

I think just having her there walking me through everything and then I think I speak for the whole team when I say these she's kind of the mother in the team. She takes care of everyone. She makes sure that everyone is doing what they need to do to be successful and reach their full potential.

I think personally that's what Delaney does for me, and I think I speak for the rest of the team when I say that she's the key to you are on success. Then also just being the player that she is as well. She's kind of that standard for work ethic. You know, when I see Delaney running and she's so far down the court I'm, like, okay, maybe have I to pick it up a little bit and run that hard as well. She sets a standard, and I think it helps the rest of the team meet that.

Q. Given that your first game is against Baylor this year, how are you preparing this team for this international game, and what are you some things that you would like see the team execute well on?

KARA LAWSON: I don't know that we've prepared for the international game yet. You did a sleep thing.

TOBY FOURNIER: Yeah, a SleepMe thing.

KARA LAWSON: Yeah, they had a sleep meeting to talk about what are the best practices to go over for the time change. I was not in the meeting, but hopefully they'll share the thoughts with me. So we did do that.

I'm sure they'll have some more performance-type things. We talk about hydration and nutrition and things like that to prepare for the international game.

As far as Baylor itself, we have not talked about them yet or gone over scheme yet. We'll do that as it gets a little closer. We're still working on ourselves and putting in our base offensive and defensive schemes, but we'll get there.

They're clearly a talented team. It's going to be a real challenge. That's a tough opener. It's a tough opener to start against one of the best teams in the country, but I'm excited. Looking forward to it. All of our players are looking forward to the trip to Paris and just the opportunity not just to play a great team, but also to sightsee and throw in some off the court and culture there as well. I think that's important in college that they have opportunities to do that throughout their career.

THE MODERATOR: Delaney, you saw Toby a year ago at this point. Now you're practicing with her.

TOBY FOURNIER: Why are you laughing?

THE MODERATOR: Now you are seeing her today in practice. What's the biggest difference, and should the ACC be worried?

DELANEY THOMAS: Where do I begin? This is like a different Toby. I think the confidence she's playing with and just the knowledge she's playing with is way different than last year. She's more comfortable. It's just the experience that she's had freshman year is going to set her for high things sophomore year, so I'm excited for her.

THE MODERATOR: This last question is for all three of you, and it's a one-word answer. When I say "ACC women's basketball," what's the one word that comes to mind?

KARA LAWSON: Competitive.

TOBY FOURNIER: Physical.

DELANEY THOMAS: Gritty.

THE MODERATOR: All right. Well, Duke, thank you so much for your time today, and good luck this season.

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