

# Atlantic Coast Conference Basketball Tipoff Media Day

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Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

**Pitt Panthers**

**Coach Tory Verdi**

**Amiya Jenkins**

**Mikayla Johnson**

Women's Press Conference



TORY VERDI: Yeah, I think that we'll be different. I think we're faster. We have a better skill set. I think we have more size and athleticism than we've ever had in my two previous years.

Our defense will dictate what we do offensively, but we're going to have an opportunity to go and do some different things defensively as running and jump and trapping. We want to get deflections and steals. Then we want to run to score. We have that capability this year with this year's roster.

THE MODERATOR: Coaches always talk about toughness and culture. I felt like your team truly embodied that in a special game a year ago. You were down 32 points, and this team came back and won the game. You don't see that very often. What was the message, and how much has your team -- how much do they use that just to build upon? What does it say for this team?

TORY VERDI: I think last year was last year, but while it was happening to you, it wasn't fun. Sure, the comeback was fun, and finally winning the game was fun. While you're going through it, and I don't recommend being down 32 at half, but at the same point in time we weren't playing well. You got to give SMU credit.

We talked at halftime. It was probably -- these guys would probably agree -- a spirited conversation. We weren't playing well, and I challenged them.

They had an unbelievable competitive spirit, and we came back on the court. Within the first two minutes the momentum just changed. Then obviously throughout the third period, things went our way.

Once we got into the fourth period, it did not matter what I called offensively. I knew it was going to work. I knew every shot that we were taking I just felt like, okay, that's a bucket, that's a bucket, that's a bucket. We just strung along one possession to the next and did something that we'll never forget.

THE MODERATOR: Mikayla, he used the term "spirited"

THE MODERATOR: We're going to start off with Tory Verdi of Pitt singing for us. Welcome, everyone, to the 2025 ACC Tipoff Q&A. Head coach Tony Verdi, Mikayla Johnson on the end, and Amiya Jenkins in the middle. The singing has got me thrown.

TORY VERDI: I was just saying especially, I mean, I could not get up in front of everyone and sing. No, that's, like, a phobia.

THE MODERATOR: Just look at me. Give me your go-to karaoke.

TORY VERDI: I can't do. I can't even do that. Stage fright.

THE MODERATOR: Okay. You definitely don't have stage fright on the sideline. A year ago Pitt had the second most ACC wins since joining the league. You return four players and bring in three transfers and seven freshmen. Any new gray hairs with seven freshmen on the roster?

TORY VERDI: There are plenty, but they've been fabulous. I mean, great additions to what we have. I think just our team chemistry alone is night and day, as we continue to grow the program, but getting in the gym not only with the two to my left, but the other 12 back at home, it's just fun. It's exciting.

We have an unbelievable competitive spirit, and we compete each and every single day. We're growing as a team, but we're having a lot of fun while we're working each and every single day.

THE MODERATOR: Give me the early thoughts. Any similarities to the style that we saw on the floor last year? Any major differences?



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in the locker room discussion. Describe your head coach and what he does for you guys, because that's really special. You don't see that very often, so there is something there that you guys respond to him.

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: I would say if I could use one word to describe Verdi, it would be passion. He definitely shows his passion in many ways, on the court, off the court, always making sure we're okay.

I would say with last year's team and this year's team we've built a certain amount of trust in him that allows us to give us, like -- for us to give our all towards him. I think that showed last year, and that will show definitely this year.

THE MODERATOR: Amiya, obviously hard to sit out last year with the injury. What did you learn, one, about yourself, and what is going to make you a better player now that you're back on the court?

AMIYA JENKINS: I definitely learned that I'm stronger than I thought. Obviously, like, that was a lot to go through, so it definitely set me back mentally, but being able to overcome everything and be where I am today just makes me more excited and just more hungry to be back to start the season.

THE MODERATOR: Tory, can you talk about Nylah Wilson's game and maybe what we should expect from her this season?

TORY VERDI: Sure. I think she's a scorer. She's super competitive. She plays both sides of the ball, but she's a tremendous asset.

She was ranked 29th in the country. A really good athlete, but just a competitor. She's going to have for the people with her on the floor that are just as good, if not better, which makes us, you know, so dynamic as a team.

I'm super excited to have her be a part of this team, and her future is tremendously bright, along with the two to my left. Right now with our roster we have everyone coming back the following year.

To me the most important thing is in order to sustain that success is to keep everyone on this team here so that we can have the same team the following year and we just continue to grow the program.

But I'm excited about Nylah. I'm excited about these two as well. I mean, I think that when you look at MJ's development from where she's been to what she did last year, she really came into her own in ACC basketball. She

increased her scoring by almost 10 or 11 points a game.

You look at Mimi, and Mimi was going to have a great year last year, and we expect the same from her this year. I definitely have a dynamic duo to my left, but we have a lot of pieces back in Pittsburgh that we're certainly really excited about.

THE MODERATOR: Mikayla, you're not the first person under his tutelage that's made a big jump. There's something about his player development. Can you speak to that development? Then, also, what was the focus this offseason for this year?

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: So last year I came in not playing a minute of basketball, so just having that trust with Verdi and knowing that, like, he genuinely wants the best for me and just trust in the process every single day. I allowed that to jump-start my growth in games, practices, him challenging me even on days when I'm, like, What is he talking about? It allowed me grow into that person that I was last year.

Now growing into a better position of being a leader and having to find my own in that position as well. This offseason I would say we worked on a lot of pace, being faster, getting my shot off faster, defense, because last year was a little bit shaky for me.

So just really growing into that and being a better leader for younger people as well.

**Q. Yesterday was National Coaches Day. Can you talk to us about your coaching staff, your supporting coaching staff, and what they mean to ya'll's program?**

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: I would say this is basically a family away from my family, because I'm from Alaska, so I'm pretty far from home. I would genuinely say from my visit to today I have felt loved by every single one of them. I can come to them whenever I have a problem.

I can joke with them, even if they might not have a smile on their face. If I don't have a smile on my face, they make sure it appears one way or another. I genuinely feel like this is my family away from my family.

AMIYA JENKINS: I would agree to that. It's definitely a family atmosphere. We have trust in them. They have trust in us. There's a mutual respect both ways, so we just kind of flow.

THE MODERATOR: Amiya, speaking of the family piece, can you talk to us about Coach's Italian chicken? I'm sorry. Famous Italian chicken.

TORI VERDI: In the last interview they forgot, and they only said I made hot dogs, packaged hot dogs, during our cookout.

THE MODERATOR: I've been told famous.

AMIYA JENKINS: I wasn't aware that was the chicken we were talking about. I did not have it at the cookout.

TORY VERDI: That's disappointing.

AMIYA JENKINS: I had the hot dogs, though.

TORY VERDI: The hot dogs were good, though. They were good. I will say that. They were. I didn't make them, but I grilled them to perfection.

AMIYA JENKINS: I can't speak on the chicken, though.

TORY VERDI: Well, we'll have to do a redo.

THE MODERATOR: I'm just going to say, it's not so famous if the players aren't eating it.

TORY VERDI: We're talking two of them. Everybody else ate it.

THE MODERATOR: Sample size. Sample size.

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: To be fair, it was a pool day. Like, when you come out the pool, you are used to, like, a hot dog, not, like, chicken.

AMIYA JENKINS: The size of the chicken was pretty, like -- it was large. It was a big --

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: Portion.

AMIYA JENKINS: Yes.

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: We can eat, but... --

THE MODERATOR: Mikayla, you mentioned you are from Alaska, and you are definitely a first in all my years of coaching and now in this role. You are the first player I've ever become aware of that hunts bears.

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: Yes.

THE MODERATOR: How did this come about, and can you walk us through a typical experience of hunting a bear?

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: Okay. I mean, it's pretty boring. I'm

not going to lie. It's a lot of sitting, being silent, and being silent. Basically the bear comes along and you take your shot, but I would say I came about it because my dad. He's military, so, like, he had to find other ways to explore that.

He's put us in a lot of outdoor activities, like fishing, hunting, four-wheeling, you name it. I would say hunting is just one of those peaceful things he really enjoys so we did that a lot.

THE MODERATOR: Black bear, little bear.

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: We have it on our wall, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: I'm not going to mess with you.

TORY VERDI: I've seen the pictures. Big bear. Not little. Like, you would run from the big bear.

THE MODERATOR: I'm running if I see her with a gun. I'm sorry.

TORY VERDI: You and me both. That's fair.

THE MODERATOR: Amiya, what's the most special item that you have customized? Why is it special to you? Just talk us through that talent that you have.

AMIYA JENKINS: I would say probably shoes mostly, because I mean, I wear them every day. I like to customize shoes for my friends and stuff, too. No, no, no, none of these. None of these.

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: Now that I know, that's good.

TORY VERDI: You know I like white, yeah.

AMIYA JENKINS: I could get you right, though.

THE MODERATOR: You may get a lot more offers coming in. Tory, now you're going in your third season. Talk to me about what makes the coaches in the ACC so special?

TORY VERDI: All their experience. When you look at it, a lot of winning has taken place throughout the ACC or other programs that they've had in other conferences.

So you're going to get somebody's best each and every single day. The preparation is endless. A lot of sleepless nights.

I know for a fact that I'm not the only one doing that. I know that my colleagues in the league are doing the same thing, so just try to find your niche and try to be just a little



bit better, one point better than them.

We expect that we're going to get everybody's best each and every single night. I'm sure that they think the same.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, we talked about you guys have ten new faces on the roster this year. Give us that one player that you think a couple of weeks in everyone is going to be talking about.

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: I think one player that's going to surprise some people is Macie. Macie brings a lot of heart to this team that in tough times when I hear her voice, I'm just, like, all right, I got to push a little bit more.

She could not play, she could be the most skillless person, and she will just give you that heart, and I love that about her. It's her character, and she shows up every single day.

AMIYA JENKINS: I agree with that. I also feel like Jayda is also going to surprise some people. I feel like she's, like, a silent killer. Like, she works really hard, and she does big things in the most unexpected moments. I feel like that really just will shock people.

THE MODERATOR: Tory, I asked this yesterday. It's a tough one, so think this through. Who in the ACC of coaches do you think gives out the best Halloween candy?

TORY VERDI: Oh, Jeff Walz, just because of his character. You probably will never know what you are going to get, so I think the surprise element would be one for me.

THE MODERATOR: This is the last question for all of you, and it will be a one-word answer. We'll start on the end with Mikayla. When I say "ACC women's basketball," what does that mean to you?

MIKAYLA JOHNSON: Exciting.

AMIYA JENKINS: Fight.

TORY VERDI: Winning.

THE MODERATOR: Pitt women's basketball, thank you so much for your time this morning. Good luck this season.

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