

Atlantic Coast Conference Basketball Tipoff Media Day

Tuesday, October 6, 2026

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

SMU Mustangs

Coach Adia Barnes

Theresa Hagans, Jr.

Zahra King

Women's Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the ACC Tip Off Q&A. I am happy to welcome SMU to the stage with me this morning led by head Coach Adia Barnes entering her third season at SMU, Theresa Hagans Jr., as well as Zahra King. Thank you for your time, ladies.

Adia, you return four players to SMU. They will be joined by five freshmen and four transfers. Obviously a number of new players this season. What was your focus in recruiting as you go into year two of the ACC, and how does this group of newcomers help you to take the next step in the ACC?

ADIA BARNES: Well, really good, young players. Excited to coach. Theresa was one of the focal points bringing in. And just wanted to have this group that returned, but a lot of them were hurt last year and then add some pieces, so super excited.

THE MODERATOR: What have you seen so far with this group that gives you excitement for this upcoming season?

ADIA BARNES: You know, I love coaching them. Zahra was the focal point to return this year. Wanted to have her back. Then Theresa, this dynamic back court. Friends from New York from many years ago. They tried to say they were cousins, but I knew they were lying.

But just wanted to have a dynamic back court. Wanted to have a young core together that I can keep together for a couple of years and add some pieces.

So I think we have the right formula this year.

THE MODERATOR: After going through that first year in the ACC, what did you learn that's going to make you a better head coach in year two?

ADIA BARNES: Winning is fun. You know, we're going to be young, but it's a group of young women that are hungry, that want to be good, and just making sure we have the right pieces.

We had eight players out last year injured. Really hard, long year, but wanted to make sure I had some players that were hungry, want to be good, want to be a pro, want to learn, and want to build something special.

I think that when you're in a building process, it's not easy, so you have to have the right people that want to do that, that aren't afraid to bring the team on their back and do something special, and these young women are ready to do it.

THE MODERATOR: Zahra, you led the team in scoring a year ago at over 14 points a game and a big whopping 40 on this one when she was at Pitt and 49 steals. What was your area of focus this offseason to elevate your game?

ZAHRA KING: The biggest area of focus for me was definitely bringing my assisted turnover ratio even. Definitely elevating my skills as a point guard. I played more off the ball. That's where I'm more comfortable at.

But being able to grow my game and being able to play point guard is where I've been able to grow mostly, and valuing each and every possession while still getting my teammates involved.

THE MODERATOR: Theresa, new to SMU, but not to the ACC. You were an all-freshman team a year ago at Pitt. What do you feel like the greatest lesson you learned last season that you can bring to Dallas to help this team?

THERESA HAGANS JR.: The greatest thing I feel like I learned for me was definitely being able to take constructive criticism. I feel like the team we have now, everybody is really good at taking that. They don't feel no type of way.

Q. When I was looking at your nonconference schedule, your exhibition games kind of stood out to



me. West Texas A&M on October 21st and then UNT Dallas on October 27th. What do you get from playing regional games like that?

ADIA BARNES: Well, the first thing you guys have the coolest name. I like that. Three -- what was your name, three chicks and a --

Q. Three Chicks in a Pod.

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, I like that. The first thing, I really want to be intentional about that, so trying to build something special in Dallas was really important. So playing locally, first of all, you don't have to travel and you can bring fans.

So I think that being intentional about getting some local teams, creating a community where people want to come to games, that was important. Because we could have played -- we usually play someone out of L.A., but I wanted to be intentional about staying in Dallas, staying in the region, building it. Hopefully it attracts some more people to come to kind of build that fan base.

Q. What are you most excited about with this team this year as you prepare for the season?

ADIA BARNES: I'm most excited about just the young women. I think that they're hungry. They came to build it with us, and I think we were intentional about getting those right pieces that want to do that. Because not everybody wants to do that. Some people want to go to where it's already established and figure out their way.

I felt like they wanted to come and do something special and they want to win, and they weren't afraid of getting their -- rolling up their sleeves and doing it with us. So that was really important.

I think one of the players that's the anchor to that is Grace. Grace is a blue-collar, rebounding machine that's not afraid to do the dirty work, and that's the kind of leadership.

And she's the only player that we're going to lose this year. So if you look at the rest of our team, we're going to have everybody back for at least three years.

So bringing her, then bringing someone like Adja who has been around a lot of pro players and then bringing Zahra and Theresa, they're also young too. They're teaching the freshmen that we have and also learning from some of the upper classmen, but knowing that we're going to keep that core together was really -- it was really important to me for how we do what we do and how I've had success in the past.

THE MODERATOR: Theresa, Coach mentioned that you two have a long-standing relationship. From what I read at 7 years old you met one another. Do you remember the first time you met her, and what were your initial thoughts and how excited are you now to be reunited?

THERESA HAGANS JR.: When I first met her, my first thought was, like, wow, like, she's really good. She stood out because she always had, like, some black and blue braids or definitely color braids, but you can definitely see she was really good. But it's just amazing playing with her now.

ADIA BARNES: She still has those black and blue braids now.

ZAHRA KING: It was probably when I was a little older. I didn't start doing that until maybe middle school.

THE MODERATOR: 7 1/2 years old.

ADIA BARNES: 8. That's fun.

THE MODERATOR: Zahra, same thing: Do you remember the first time that you met Theresa and how excited are you now to be reunited?

ZAHRA KING: I'm really excited to play with Theresa, because it's just amazing knowing that where we come from and being able to play on the biggest stage together. It's amazing.

Honestly, just seeing how far we've come from where we were just playing in little small gyms, playing around the country, local tournaments, and things like that, and now we're on the biggest stage together. So it's fun. It's fun.

Q. This is for the players. How has the team grown during the offseason both individually and collectively?

ZAHRA KING: Our team has grown a lot from June through now. I think at first we learned -- we had to go through a lot of adversity with conditioning and being on the track, 6:00 a.m., and that's where one of my areas of growth were over the summertime and just being able to push through hard times.

So we've grown a lot off the court and on the court just being able to learn and adapt to the new defenses, new things that are being thrown at us. So that's where I think our biggest growth or area of growth has come from.

Then, also, learning each other's chemistry, what each



other likes to do, what each other doesn't, what we don't like collectively as a team. Just being able to play and get up to the standard that we need to be for the season.

THERESA HAGANS JR.: Yeah, I would definitely also say the 6:00 a.m. thing. I feel like that was the biggest part for me because I was definitely trying to work on, like, when I'm tired, not showing it, and being able to pick up everybody else. When everybody else is tired, just pick them up so they know they can do it.

I definitely think on the court -- what do you think it is?

ZAHRA KING: I think on the court our biggest area of growth was definitely continuing to understand what Coach wants of us.

THERESA HAGANS JR.: Yes.

ZAHRA KING: Because we have a new team. So continuing to build that chemistry.

THERESA HAGANS JR.: And we're all really young. I think the biggest thing that we are definitely working on and we're still getting good at is our defense. Since we're so young and all so new being able to grasp and catch on to the new stuff she's throwing at us every single day, and I feel like we're really doing good at that.

THE MODERATOR: Adia, Zahra's development across last season was impressive. Can you discuss her growth and what we should expect to see from her this season?

ADIA BARNES: Her improvement last year was tremendous, because remember, she didn't play a lot as a freshman, so just having different experiences. I thought that her being the focal point last year has helped her grow tremendously because she had to get double-teamed, triple-teamed, had to take all the shots, had to take all the tough shots, had to play through when she's tired, had to play through when no one else is getting open or we can't run plays. Just very -- it's very difficult.

But I think those challenges will make her better, and I think that one of the areas that I've seen tremendous growth in her is her conditioning. Because I always say great players don't get tired. When good players get tired, great players kick their ass.

So I'm just teaching them fitness shouldn't be a factor. If you look at all the best players, fitness was never a factor. Kelsey Plum can run for days. Sue Bird can run for days. You can just play. So that's the next level in our game, and that's the maturity thing that you don't realize until you go pro.

So getting them both at that elite level. And it's not just you're a good athlete. You can pass the test, but can you kill it? Can you do your best? So it's not about passing a test, like a fitness test. It's about killing it to reach your potential.

But there's a reason for that. It's not just because we like to do fitness tests. It's so you have to accomplish something. You then in a game in the fourth quarter, you're not tired. You're mentally tough and locked in.

So all of those things they've both grown in that area, but I'm challenging them daily to lead. So what does leadership look like? How do you lead? How do you lead when things are tough? They both have grown so much in the last couple of months, and Zahra in the last year and I'm sure Theresa. She decided to come across the country for a new challenge and to come take another team on her back.

I think they're happy to do it together, and I'm happy to coach them. They're both tremendous young women and players, but they do the right stuff off the court. She's in one of the top business schools in the country that's extremely competitive. 4.0 students get turned down every day at our business school at SMU.

Then Theresa is really smart, does everything off the court. They are great ambassadors for SMU and the ACC, so I'm proud of them in every way.

Q. You are no stranger to success getting a program like you did early in Arizona. After your initial stretch here in this conference, what have you learned to be able to create success moving forward?

ADIA BARNES: I've learned a lot. You know, last year was very difficult. It wasn't difficult -- you know, you get a new job. You're there for a purpose. You get the job to build. That's what Damon Evans hired me. I came for Damon Evans, our AD, and President Hartzell, our president. I think it's great leadership, which is the most essential thing for me.

But coming here and building a program fast and having eight players, that was really difficult. I mean, we had -- not as a program, but personally as a head coach, the biggest losses I've had in my career. I'm talking that's, like, 37 years. As player, as a coach, as a pro. I've never been somewhere and lost by 50 points. That was gut checks.

Usually as a coach you go in a situation where you can still coach a team up and be competitive enough to try to find a way to win. Last year was hard. I was in situations where



that wasn't going to be possible and I knew there wasn't a fighting chance.

So you learn a lot. Then you have to build this things the right way, so I did learn a lot as the coach. Learned that I had to go a little bit younger, hungry, build this core, keep this core together, then we're going to be really good.

That's what we did at Arizona. When we went to the national championship, we had that core together for three years. So that was what I was intentional about this year.

Yeah, we are going to have some growing pains being young, but we have the right pieces and the players that want to do it. Then everything else will take care of itself.

So that and then just learning that this is a different time. It is not about relationships as much. It's more transactional. So you have to change as a coach with the time. So there was a lot of things off the record that I've learned, how to structure contracts, how to do things, so you're not in a situation where there can be eight players out, because if you do that right, there's probably two players out. That is a part of the process.

As a coach, you have to pivot, adjust, and change with the times and understand that. I can tell you, I learned so much. So I am a better coach after last year. It didn't look like that on the court, but I have grown. I will be better and more prepared and equipped for this time right now.

THE MODERATOR: To wrap it up, I'm going to ask you all to answer this, and we'll start with you, Zahra. Give me one word to describe SMU women's basketball this season.

ZAHRA KING: One word. I would say fiery.

THERESA HAGANS JR.: I would say grit.

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, I would say gritty, blue-collar, hard-working.

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