

Atlantic Coast Conference Basketball Tipoff Media Day

Wednesday, October 7, 2026

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Pitt Panthers

Coach Jeff Capel

Naithan George

Baye Ndongo

Men's Press Conference



them, you know, that they can give. I'm grateful for the attitude that they have had and their work ethic and things like that.

And then we were able to fill the roster around these two with other really good players, guys that have experience and guys that want to prove that they're really good players and prove that they can win.

So I love the attitude that I've seen since we've gotten together in June. I love the competitive spirit that they have with each other. But it's really important for all of us to understand how much we need each other in order for us to be at our best. So I'm excited to see what we can do.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. What's the biggest challenge this team is going to face, and how do you think you'll handle it?

JEFF CAPEL: Yeah, well, the biggest challenge right now is we have 13 new guys, two freshmen and 11 guys from the portal. So us getting to know each other, each other's strengths, weaknesses, us being able to hold each other accountable, understanding that in order to hold someone accountable, you have to hold yourself accountable first.

Every team goes through adversity, and you normally don't experience that until you get punched in the mouth, until you take a loss or you a couple of losses or things like that. That's when you see what you're really made of, who you really are.

Hopefully we don't have to take a lot of those, but I know that it's going to come. That's when you really find out.

Right now everyone's in the hope mode. Everyone's in the -- because you hadn't played anyone else. But when you really start to play and then you get the playing time and are guys still going to be happy and excited if they're not playing as much as they thought or if they're not performing as well as they thought? That's when you really start to figure out who you really are.

We're in the mode right now where, you know, we think we

THE MODERATOR: Joining us are the Pitt Panthers. Coach Capel will offer us an opening statement. The floor is yours.

JEFF CAPEL: First and foremost, it's always great to be back in North Carolina. You know, this is the heart of ACC country. It's great to be here amongst all of you and to spend half a day.

I'm excited about our season. I'm excited about our league, first and foremost. I think it's the best basketball conference. We took a major step forward last year as a league with getting eight teams to the NCAA Tournament, and I thought the teams performed well. We anticipate and look forward to hopefully having more teams this year.

I'm excited about our team, about our roster. I thought our staff did a really good job of putting this roster together. We wanted to get experience. We wanted to get experience in this league.

As we knew we had to overhaul our roster, the thing that I talked about with our staff was we wanted to get -- it was really important to get a really good point guard and a really good interior player and then build everything around that.

The two guys that we brought here with us represent that.

Naithan George has been a really good point guard in this league for three years. Led the league in assists two years ago.

Baye Ndongo has been one of the better interior players in this league.

Now, I have asked them for more. I think there's more in



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know who we are, but I know we will have a better picture of that once we go through something.

Q. Entering your ninth season at Pitt; where was Pitt nine years ago comparative to where you believe Pitt is standing today?

JEFF CAPEL: Well, nine years ago when I took this job I thought it was a rebuild. After I'd been on the job for a month, month and a half, I realized that I was wrong. It's a build. It's not a rebuild.

When I took the job, it was April of 2018. Pitt had just finished its fourth year in the ACC. I was the third head coach in four years. The athletic director at the time was the third athletic director, so there was incredible instability, and they were coming off of a season where they were the only team in the country that was part of a conference that didn't win a game.

So the talent level wasn't where I thought it needed to be in the ACC. We struggled my first four years. We had some moments where we were -- I thought we were turning the corner, and then there were self-inflicted wounds.

My third year there, it was the COVID year, so we went through a bunch of different stuff. The world changed with COVID. Everything was shut down. That next season, you talk about a whacky season playing with no one at the games, but we were pretty good.

At one point we were 4-1 in the ACC. We had just beat Duke. We had just beat Syracuse. Syracuse was really good. We were really good, but we hurt ourselves with internal fighting.

Then after you got out of COVID, the first iteration of NIL -- and I say first iteration because it's changed every year -- so four years ago -- five years ago we were coming off of our worst season. We had lost 21 games. I had just finished my fourth year. We had not had a winning season, didn't know if I was going to be the coach.

We got a group, man, that they felt like they had something to prove. They had a chip on their shoulder, and we came together. We had a magical run as far as we got to the NCAA Tournament, won a couple of games.

The next year I thought we were better. I thought we got snubbed. We had the highest finish ever in the ACC. We finished fourth. I thought we should have been a tournament team. I thought that team could have been a second weekend team, especially how we were playing at the end.

The year after that we were I thought a really good team. We were a top-25 team until the first week of January. Then our best player got hurt, and we could never recover from that. We had a winning season, but it wasn't worthy enough to earn an NCAA Tournament.

We were bad last year. So I think we've taken steps forward as a program from nine years ago when I was first hired, but it's still not where we need to be, we want to be, or where I thought we would be right now.

Q. Naithan and Baye have already played a lot of ACC basketball. How valuable is that experience when so much of this roster is new to Pitt?

JEFF CAPEL: Yeah, it's huge. It's huge, and it was something that we were mindful of, like I mentioned, when we were putting this roster together.

I've always felt that you win with really good guards. You have to have really good guard play, and I think Nait is a really good guard. I think some of other guards we have are really good guards.

The other thing I think you have to have is an interior presence. Baye is that. He's been that during his career. You know, he's been -- his former coach, when we were recruiting him, said you can pencil in 12 and 8. You can -- that's what he's done.

My first conversation with Baye was that I think you can get more, and I've tried to challenge him with that every day.

But their experience in this league, Jonathan Powell's experience in this league, Jalil Bethea's experience in this league, Armani Mighty has experience in this league at Boston College, Akir Souare has experience in this league with these two at Georgia Tech and then with Nait at Syracuse.

So we have guys that have experience at this level in this league, and we're going to lean on that this year to help us become the best team that we can possibly be.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you. Questions for Naithan George.

Q. Did you and Baye have any conversations together about playing together again, and how much does the experience that you had at Georgia Tech together help you make this transition now?

NAITHAN GEORGE: Right. Yeah, we had conversations prior to that. Both know what we are capable of. We came with that same goal-minded mindset, and we came here.



Q. Last year being at Syracuse, what are your positive takeaways from that experience, and ultimately, why did you choose Pitt?

NAITHAN GEORGE: Yeah, Syracuse was a great learning experience. You know, being in a different atmosphere, different system, you know, different people, different staff, it teaches you a lot in how to adapt to different environments.

You said why Pitt? Yeah, I say just the authenticity. Right when I spoke to the coaches, of course right when I spoke to Coach Capel, it was just real and they told me what their goal was, and our goals matched each other. We came for that common goal.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Naithan. Questions for Baye Ndongo.

Q. Baye, what made Pitt the right fit for you when you were transferring from Georgia Tech?

BAYE NDONGO: What make Pitt right for me? I mean, obviously the coaches, the way they recruit me, the goal that we set for next year. You know, my teammate, Nait, Square, them guys that really want to do something this year, and we had the conversation.

So, yeah, overall, I would just say all that. Yes, trying to win.

Q. What is it that kind of the chemistry between the two of you guys that has made your connection so successful?

BAYE NDONGO: I mean, me and Nait been knowing each other for a minute, and honestly we do compete a lot. We do go to the gym play ones against some of the guys. I feel like just having that connection, just knowing nobody going to back up to each other, and we care about each other. We try and help each other.

And we were roommates too, so I feel like, yeah, that's where it come from. It's all natural.

Q. To go a little bit deeper into the decision to come to Pitt, what is it about Coach Capel? What stands out about his leadership style and the type of person that he is as a leader?

BAYE NDONGO: I mean, as you can tell, he a really good guy. I just like the way they recruit me and the goal they set and how he want to keep me accountable and how he want to win. Especially this coming up year, because

obviously we really haven't win. Me, I haven't really win nothing in college as a team, so I feel like going to team and the goal that we set as a team, like, the program goal, I feel like that would fit me really well, so that's why I just, you know, went there.

Q. Baye, you started 90 ACC games. What do you understand about playing in this league that you might have not been able to understand as a freshman?

BAYE NDONGO: I got to come up really every day, every game, because everything count. Every little thing count and you can't take no day off. You can't play late. You can't do none of them little things.

Just got to stay locked in every time, and you know you got to play with hunger every time or the whole two, three hours, the whole game. So, yeah.

THE MODERATOR: In your time at Georgia Tech, the Panthers beat the Yellow Jackets two out of three times. Was there something about that style from Coach Capel and play that just frustrated the bejesus out of you?

BAYE NDONGO: Maybe, maybe (smiling). I mean, I don't think that have nothing to do with it. It's just, you know, I like Coach Capel, how he coach. I used to watch him coach some players too. And I have one of my friend that we both came from Senegal. We're really close, and he was telling me a lot about him. So yeah, it's just all.

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