

Atlantic Coast Conference

Operation Basketball

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JIM CHRISTIAN: Very, very excited. Obviously this time of the year there's a lot of excitement in everybody's team and everybody's program. We're at that juncture that I think our team is kind of ready to play somebody else, and to be quite honest with you, I've had so much fun coaching this group of people, it's my third year, and for the first time I feel like at the base and core of our program we can finally start identifying who we are and kind of what we want to be.

That lessons and those things that we learned can be carried on because I'll have nine guys back, so I won't play a guy on the perimeter this year at the 1, 2 or the 3 that's not a freshman or a sophomore. They're going to play virtually 90 games together, and they make a lot of sense for what we're trying to do. I'm very, very excited and looking forward to this season and what we can do.

Q. To take a look at your third season coming in, the last couple season, no postseason berths, just what you can say about the disconnect and what the culture is like this year and what you think about this team the way it's set up going into the third year for you?

JIM CHRISTIAN: Well, it was hard because of the numbers. When I took over -- nothing that I walked into, I didn't know. I knew this was going to be a process, and because sheer numbers, so my first year I had seven seniors on that team, and so anything that we learned or things we did or things we tried to teach, they were all going to walk out the door when they graduated.

Then I had nine available scholarships because in this day and age somebody transfers and we had a young guy go pro. So that's nine. You only get 13 scholarships. So in essence we were an expansion team.

Now for the first time we have a pretty good nucleus. And the thing that happens that I know both coaches can probably do this, when you have a difficult year, two things happen. Any difficult situation, there's some people who run away from it, but then there's a special kind of kid that runs towards it. I believe that's kind of what's happened. These kids know, okay, they have a chance to kind of leave a mark here. They have a

chance to kind of create something or have a rebirth of a program that's been down, and that excites them. There are some kids that want that, and I really believe we have that, especially on the perimeter with our young class.

Because of it, I think, as I said, from the negative, bad season, comes a positive. I think we could be one of the better stories in college basketball if everybody performs to the way I think they can and the way they think they can and all the things that happened.

To worry about the postseason I knew was probably going to be tough in years one and two just because of sheer numbers and kind of what you're inheriting, but now moving forward, I think we're able now to identify ourselves. And that's what excites me as a coach is that I feel for the first time of my three teams, okay, the identity we form and what we do, this can carry on and become special, and these guys can really get a good feel for each other because they're going to play 90 games together.

Q. Seven new guys on this year's roster; what went into you and the staff sitting down and evaluating and looking at what you needed to bring in with that many open scholarships?

JIM CHRISTIAN: Well, it was clear to us -- the needs were clear. We needed some veteran older guys, and we got two fifth-year front court players. Connor Tava, who I coached against when I was at Ohio. He played at Western Michigan. And he's a guy that just plays the game the right way. He's not an overly athletic guy, but he's smart and tough and understands how to win. And a young man named Maurice Jeffers from Delaware who's 6'8", 245 pounds. To go along with some of the young guards we had.

We were fortunate later in the year to get an older perimeter player named Jordan Chatman who's a 23-year-old sophomore, played at BYU, and just kind of plays the game the right way. We knew returning Jerome Robinson and A.J. Turner we had two good things, and our clear need was at the point. We haven't really had a point guard in my two years. We played Olivier there and Eli there, who were both more scoring guards, and now with Ky Bowman and Ty Graves, we have two point guards in our program, two fast, athletic, tough kids who really can change the

mentality of what we do, especially on the defensive end of the floor, where we haven't been able to do that because those guys, we were relying on them so much to score that they couldn't go after anybody and attack them.

And I think now we can do that and maybe formulate our defensive identity the way we want it.

Q. After two full seasons in the ACC now and preparing to go into your third after spending time at TCU and in the MAC most of your career, what have you learned most about the ACC?

JIM CHRISTIAN: Well, the thing that makes the ACC special, and I think one of the underlying reasons why the ACC has so much success in the NCAA Tournament is the difficulty in preparing for certain teams from a style of play, especially the defenses that they're playing on short turnarounds. And I think, to me, it's one of the -- obviously we have great players, and that's always a huge key to success, and obviously we have great coaches, but the uniqueness or the styles of play, some leagues that you coach in, the teams play a similar style of play so the preps -- there's some wrinkles, but pretty much the same. In the ACC it could be a complete unique preparation in two days, and maybe it's something you haven't seen or the way they do it is something they're going to be excellent at. If you don't prepare well, you're not going to have a chance to be successful. And that's kind of the thing I think, in addition to all the things that everybody knows about the great players and talented players and great coaches, the uniqueness of preparation I think is probably one of the underlying reasons the ACC has so much success in the tournament.

If you're trying to on a short preparation get ready to play Syracuse, the things that you'd normally do against a 2-3 zone, they're not going to work that night. They may not be as successful as they were against somebody else who is not as good at that, or Louisville who might change to two or three defenses in the same possession. If you haven't seen that, to get ready for that in a day or two days, that's a challenge.

Q. Given that unique preparedness that you talk about and with the number of new guys coming in, does it challenge you as a coaching staff to make sure that these kids are pliable enough and ready enough to face those unique prep challenges?

JIM CHRISTIAN: Yeah, especially because they may not have the basketball experience, so understanding the game and maybe basketball IQ is something for us. The way we do it, a smarter player is probably more beneficial to us than just an overly athletic, raw player because of that, because we're not going to be the most athletic team that we play. So we have to get

more skilled, tougher guys, and that's happening.

Q. Coach, Jerome Robinson was in here, and he talked about having a more attacking style this year, more downhill drives. Is that something you've been stressing to your team?

JIM CHRISTIAN: Yeah, I think that's a strength of ours. Our guards are very fast. I've been doing this 16 years. This is the fastest perimeter team that I've had. When I was at TCU we had some pretty athletic, fast perimeter teams, but that's a strength of theirs.

The other part of it is that I'm trying to simplify as much for our two young freshmen point guards so they're not kind of looking at me the whole time, so they know, okay, ball through the net, we're doing A, B or C here, and it's something we can better at as we go. But letting them play and not kind of stymieing them with thinking all the time, because I want their natural instincts, because they're both very aggressive and they both can make plays.

And then obviously on the defensive end of the floor, our speed I think can create some problems for people that we have not been able to do. So that's exciting to me because I think, again, we have a chance to kind of identify what we want and play to their strengths. And there's six of them. We have six perimeter guys now, where we haven't had that. But we still fall into the boat, as many teams that are rebuilding, that we have to stay healthy. We're not going to be able to withstand a sprained ankle in the middle of the year or high ankle sprain in the middle of the year that A.J. Turner suffered. Well, that's five or six games, and we're not that deep yet, and only two classes, we're not really at that point yet. Like I like to tell a lot of people, I think we're much more talented and much better. What that equates to in this phenomenal league is yet to be seen.