

Big Ten Basketball Media Days

Monday, October 9, 2023

Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Northwestern Wildcats

Women's Head Coach

Coach Joe McKeown



JOE McKEOWN: Thank you, and excited to be here. I just would like to take a moment. One of our great, great players Veronica Burdon, who plays for Dallas in the WNBA, and one of the great Big Ten players of all time, I was just thinking about her, and the reason I bring that up, she signed a contract to play in Israel and was at the airport in Boston on a flight to go to Tel Aviv. Fortunately was able to get off of that and move forward.

We've had any number -- Israel is such a great basketball pro opportunity. We have a lot of players that have played there, and I have players that live there now. So just wanted to take a moment and keep them in our prayers. It's a very difficult time.

Moving forward to Big Ten media day, just really excited to get back going. Fortunate enough now to be in my 16th year at Northwestern, I think my 40th year in women's college basketball. Trying to figure out on the flight how to guard Caitlin Clark, so I've come up with two things along the way, and we'll see how that goes.

We had an opportunity -- Dr. Gragg, our athletic director, gave our team an opportunity this summer to go to Spain and play, and we had a great trip, won three games.

It just gave us a chance to bond as a team. We're used to winning at a high level. We're used to winning championships and top-20 teams, and last year was a little tough.

Our approach now is to just put our head down and go to work, and I think the Spain trip really helped us.

I've got some great young players, so I think you'll see the Wildcats right back where we were, and really looking forward to the season.

We carved out a brutal schedule, which I want to challenge our team. We're at Notre Dame, we're in tournaments with Stanford and Florida State. Hopefully by the time the Big Ten hits, we'll be ready.

I have two players here today, one a senior, Paige Mott, and the other a junior, Caileigh Walsh, I think have chances to be all-Big Ten players, and really, like I said, have taken on the challenge of coming off last year, and leadership-wise, too.

Like I said, we're really excited about the season. This will be obviously our last opportunity to play some teams -- our schedule will change, I know, with the addition of four West Coast teams. No idea how that's going to go, but we're in a great league, men and women, and it's just fun to be part of it.

Appreciate any questions. You're going to see a different Northwestern team this year, so you guys get in free, but buy some tickets, too.

Q. Having been in this league as long as you have, obviously next year there's going to be an enormous change again, but I was wondering if you could talk about in your opinion how much better this league is or maybe how much deeper this league is since you first joined it.

JOE McKEOWN: Yeah, man, I've been here through the expansion of -- when we added Nebraska and then when we added Rutgers and Maryland, and to look at the four -- USC, UCLA, Washington and Oregon, but when we added -- the common thread, when we added Nebraska, Maryland, and Rutgers, what a lot of people, whatever reason, think about this, three programs that had great women's basketball when they came into our league. Big crowds, incredible coaches.

You talk about the Vivian Stringers of the world, Nebraska -- I think the year before they came in our league was 32-1 in women's basketball, and then Maryland came into our league after winning the National Championship. They hit the league hard.

I think it took some adjustment on us, and I think once that happened, it just became so much more balanced.

I think the addition of the four West Coast teams now, all four -- and I've played all four places. They love women's



basketball at all four. Great talent.

I think it makes the league -- I think we'll be the best league in the country, and we'll certainly be the deepest.

Q. You mentioned Mott and Walsh as leaders on your team. What about transfer, Maggie Pina? What are you looking for from her this year?

JOE McKEOWN: I appreciate it. I'm an Eagles fan. I was a beer vendor in Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia and survived to talk about it today. I should get some cred.

Maggie Pina is an amazing story, actually a kid from Philly who has scored 990 some points in her career at Boston U. One of the great shooters.

We couldn't shoot last year, so every time we talk recruiting, which is every day, the main focus, we've got to find somebody to shoot.

Our first game in Spain she was six for six with five threes. She ain't going to play any defense, but she's going to make shots. I can guarantee you that.

Q. If you have any appropriate beer vendor stories, I'm sure we're all ears on those. But actual question, all the time you've spent in women's college basketball, does this moment -- in terms of how many people are watching, which players are known, how many different players are known, does this feel pretty different to you?

JOE McKEOWN: You know, I appreciate the question, and to give you -- at GW we had great teams, top teams. I'd always play Pat Summitt. I played Geno Auriemma. I saw the growth of our game and what they did to help it grow.

Now you're seeing the depth from a player standpoint. I love where the WNBA is right now in terms of -- unfortunately it's too deep. There's too many good players. We need to expand. I know we're starting to do that.

I've been fortunate enough to, over the last 25, 30 years, see it all happen right in front of me, and it's great to see it explode.

I thought last year's Final Four in Dallas just gave us an amazing shot in the arm. Not that it hasn't been great before that, but when the national media and when fans take an interest that aren't women's basketball fans -- maybe they're the casual fan or the sports fan even, I think that all came together for us last year, and it was great to see it and be part of it.

Hopefully it's not a one-hit wonder. I don't think it will be. But there's so many great players now, it's so deep, and I can tell you -- well, I'm the defensive coach that held Rachel Banham to 60 points, and then I watch, and I'm like, she should be playing every game somewhere.

I think all those great players, I have a lot on the plate for me that are playing in Europe right now that should be in the WNBA. We just don't have enough spots, and I think that's a big challenge.

Q. When you went to Spain and won those three games, what did you feel changed with your team in terms of the confidence coming into this season?

JOE McKEOWN: Yeah, you know, I think -- and you've seen so much. I think what it did, we played good teams. I had three great Spanish players at GW, pros and Olympians, and the level of competition is really good.

I counted those three games in my record now, so I'm the all-time leading -- win leader, men and women, in the Big Ten, something like that. I counted those games and camp games.

I feel like it just made -- it organically made you play better. European basketball is very physical. When you come over the half court, you get cracked. The referees are their cousins, and you just get up and play.

We had to show some toughness and some grit. We came from behind in a couple games.

So I just loved how it brought our team together, and hopefully it'll carry over.

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