

Big Ten Basketball Media Days

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Rutgers Scarlet Knights

Men's Head Coach

Steve Pikiell



THE MODERATOR: Next up from Rutgers University is Steve Pikiell. Coach Pikiell is entering his eighth season with the Scarlet Knights after leading them to a third consecutive postseason appearance for the first time in school history.

Coach Pikiell, we'll begin with your opening statements.

STEVE PIKIELL: This is an exciting time of the year getting back out here meeting with all the media. First, I want to welcome and congratulate Tony Petitti, our new Commissioner. He has done an unbelievable job. It's a tough job. But I really appreciate his work and look forward to working with him.

I want to welcome Mike Rhoades to the league, one of the great coaches in college basketball, great job at VCU and all his stops. He'll do a great job at Penn State.

I'm excited to be here for year eight. I think we have a chance to be a really good basketball team. I'm excited to be at Rutgers University. A lot of great things happening on our campus, including my two kids graduating here from Rutgers. It's just truly a special time. We're ranked 15th amongst public universities in U.S. News and World Report. The campus is jumping. We've sold out all of our games for the year. I'm looking forward to a tremendous year. I have three players here with me on this trip. I would have taken more too, but three.

We brought Cliff, who is back for his senior year. He came back to graduate too, which is refreshing in this day and age. Really excited. I think he is one of the best big guys in the country.

Mawot Mag is also here. I think he is one of the best defenders in the country. He'll be back from his injury, which he suffered in the middle of the season last year. Kind of hurt us down the stretch.

Then, Aundre Hyatt, those are our captains, and Aundre averaged eight and a half, almost nine points a game last year, and he will have a breakthrough senior year. He has

been terrific. We had a summer tour. He led us in scoring every game. He has been terrific in practice. He has really taken his game to the next level.

And we have another guy, Oskar Palmquist, not here with us, but a senior that's been with me through a lot of wins and a lot of exciting times at Rutgers.

We're really excited. We've added some newcomers. We jumped in the portal and got some really good players. We have a freshman class that I think is very, very good. We're just looking forward to another great year. Jersey Mike's will be jumping, and in the best league in the country too. I continue to say that.

The coaches, I get a chance to see them all and just get your competitive juices going, but Greg Gard has done a great job where he is and Tom Izzo. These teams are tough. Going to their gyms is hard.

We've added four more, and I want to welcome them into the league too with Oregon, Washington, and UCLA and USC. Another four great coaches and programs added to this already great league. We're looking forward to competing and looking forward to an exciting season.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach. We'll open the floor now to questions.

Q. Your recruiting is just through the roof right now. What has made you guys resonate on the trail? What do you say about your staff and what they've been able to make Rutgers a destination for some of the best players in college basketball?

STEVE PIKIELL: First of all, I'm lucky my staff didn't go in the portal. That's the most important thing.

I have a fantastic staff, and Brandin Knight is a special coach. He has been with me for eight years and done a great job. T.J. Thompson, probably one of the great young coaches in college basketball right now.

But I'm very fortunate. Our university is exploding. Rutgers is -- the campus is beautiful. New buildings going



up. Pat Hobbs doing a fantastic job, President Holloway. We are ranked 15th in the country in public universities.

It's an awesome place. It really is. I'm just blessed. I'm here at the right time. We have a great practice facility. We graduate everyone in our program, and guys get better. We're just lucky. We've been on the trail and working hard.

Our freshman class this year is really good. Really good, and I think we do a really good job. Again, my staff gets all the credit.

We have a new coach on our staff, too. Marlon Williamson who is doing a great job. We develop players, graduate them, and I hope we continue to do that, but I'm a product of good timing at Rutgers. The university is in a good place.

Q. When you talk about developing players, as you've done that and built your roster the way you have, how big in general has that growth from freshman year to sophomore year proven to be for some of your guys?

STEVE PIKIELL: I mean, I think it's really been huge for us. We currently have three guys in our sophomore class. Derek Simpson, Woolfolk, a big guy out of Cleveland, and Antonio Chol, player out of Buffalo, 6'10".

If you saw them last year at this time and now when you come to our practice to see them, they are completely new players. They use the year. They used the summer. They worked hard. Their bodies have developed.

I think you'll see new players. Those three guys in particular. But development is a huge part I think of every program, and luckily, they stayed. A lot of time is spent on the guys that leave. These guys stayed. More time needs to be written about the guys that stay and complete the deal and get better and buy into your program. We're certainly blessed that we had a lot of guys decide to stay and keep working and get better.

Q. Steve, you lost several of the players who handled the basketball for you a lot last year and in the years previous. What did the international tour teach you about how your offense can not only withstand those losses but improve into this season?

STEVE PIKIELL: I mean, the international tour was great for a lot of reasons. We went to Africa and Portugal. The bonding, the time you spend with each other, but doing different things too off the court I think is just tremendous. If you ever get a chance to go to those countries, you really realize too how fortunate we are here, and I think our

players really realized that too.

The offseason has been great. We have a player, Noah Fernandes from U Mass, who was their leading scorer and approximate is a really good player. He will handle the ball a great deal. Derek Simpson is electric. He is fast. He can play, and we have a freshman Jamichael Davis out of Georgia, who is as fast of a player as we've ever had in the program and doing a really good job.

Then we have Gavin Griffiths too who comes in as the highest ranked guy that I've ever recruited at Rutgers. He is 6'9". He can really shoot it and is athletic. We have a lot of ball handlers. We shoot the ball at a high level now, so that will be different for us.

I always worry. We lost a National Defensive Player of the Year, Caleb McConnell, to the Oklahoma City Thunder and he is a really good player. I'm going to make sure they play defense. That's one thing that I know, but we're really scoring the ball at a high level, and we're very athletic, and we're deep. I like the fact we can go 11, 12 deep this year. We really didn't have that kind of depth the last couple of years so when we got an injury, it hurt us.

The offseason is so important. We have great chemistry. I take my time in the portal. I bring in great kids that fit our culture. We got some of those, and we're excited about what they can bring.

Q. You talked about Aundre Hyatt and how he is due for an even bigger breakout for this program. Why?

STEVE PIKIELL: Well, I mean, he is a top 50 player out of high school, first and foremost. He went to LSU. He transferred in. This is year three for him.

I just think when players graduate or leave, the opportunity changes, and he has taken huge advantage of that. He always could score. Now he is doing a lot of things for us. He is in great shape, so by far great shape.

He is also getting his master's degree too. He is an awesome kid. He is taking on leadership roles. He is going to have a fantastic season. He really is. I'm very confident in his ability to help us a lot this year.

And he is a real tough matchup. He is built. He's 6'6", 6'7". He is strong. He can play the two, the three, the four. I can move him around. He is going to have a good season for us. And pleased he came back.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time.

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