

Big Ten Basketball Media Days

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Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Minnesota Golden Gophers

Men's Head Coach

Ben Johnson



THE MODERATOR: Our final Head Coach this morning from the University of Minnesota is Head Coach Ben Johnson. Coach Johnson is entering his third season leading the Gophers.

Coach, we'll begin with your opening statement.

BEN JOHNSON: Appreciate that. Thanks, everybody, for being here, Commissioner Tony, and everybody else who helped put this together. It really does an unbelievable job showcasing our conference and our league.

Really excited for our program and the stage that we're at here beginning year three. It's a process, and I think where we're at right now with our players, our team, our continuity, our staff is a reason for me to be really, really excited going forward, and it starts here in a few weeks.

I think we took a lot from last year. You know, it was something that due to some significant injuries, we had young guys that got valuable experience that were able to play, and that not only is going to help them, but help our team this year.

We've got Dawson García who will be returning for us, and this will be the first time in his career where he's been able to back-to-back seasons, play for the same coach and have the same offense and defensive schemes, and that will help our program.

We were able to go into the portal and add some experience, some guys that are hungry to play at this level, and we were able to add some talented young freshmen.

I really like the mix of our program right now. We've got some really good depth, which we haven't been able to have, which has made our practices really competitive, which, in turn, will make our team competitive. Just really excited to get going with this crew. They've been a really fun group to coach.

With that, I will take any questions.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open the floor up to questions for Coach Johnson.

Q. I wanted to ask about Dawson Garcia. You mentioned how he has been in the same system for back-to-back years. What do you think he can improve on? He is an all-league type player, but kind of that familiarity, and how do you feel like you can use him knowing his full skill set?

BEN JOHNSON: I think Dawson had an unbelievable offseason in terms of just his body. That was something he really takes pride in and wanted to get stronger and really worked on his conditioning.

Now it's just about being consistent. I think when you know exactly what's expected and how I'm going to be, you have returning players that understand your game and you understand their game. There's comfort in that.

Just being in the same system does nothing but hopefully give him confidence, and he has carried himself and played that way.

So now the challenge is to kind of continue how he finished last year on a really high note, with just being productive on both sides of the ball. I think his leadership will be really important.

He is up for the challenge. I think he's got a hunger like I haven't seen in a player in a long time. So I'm really excited to see what he can do and different ways that he can help our team this year.

Q. What would success look like for you, and what's the message been to the team so far about that?

BEN JOHNSON: We talk about that a lot. For us, interesting enough, I think every program when you are trying to build and grow, you know, has different stages and steps that it has to take to sustain success. For us it really started in the offseason, to be honest with you, with our academics and our guys knocked it out of the park.

That carried over to an unbelievable offseason where more



players were in the gym on their own. Then that translates to competitive practices.

I think it goes hand-in-hand. I think we have to understand who we are and where we're at and every detail matters. That's why can I say if you're really good and your stuff is tight academically, your stuff is tight socially, I know you're going to be the guy that is in the gym and watching and getting extra film and getting extra shots.

To have that kind of from top to bottom in our program, that's the first part of winning. Then it's just worry about today and having a really good practice today. I think our key is within those, finding little victories. I think that's the one thing that I have pressed on our team is now that we have some depth, we have experience, we have returners, we have to figure out what it means to win and how you win. That's just an everyday process, and we'll worry about that as each day presents itself.

Q. Ben, a two-part question. One, can you talk about the Big Ten tournament, men and women being here in Minneapolis, and the second question would be this is your third year with the program, and you have your third starting point guard coming up from the transfer portal. What are the challenges with that and how are those two point guards establishing themselves?

BEN JOHNSON: Good question. Really excited to host the Big Ten Tournament from the men's standpoint. I think it's a unique opportunity for our fan base to really be able to be impactful, hopefully, for us. It's a chance for them to see some really good basketball.

As far as the point guard situation, that's part of college basketball now. I think we've done a pretty good job throughout my years here of finding guys in the portal that fit us, and I think that's the most important thing.

We've got some experience now in the back court. We've got a freshman in Cam Christie that isn't your prototypical freshman. He is a mature, young man. So you hope you can fall back on that experience, although it might not be under me or in our league. When you have older guys that have been through it that have played at a high level and have played in meaningful minutes in college basketball, I do think that translates.

So we're excited about what we're able to do this year coming up with our back court, as well as with everybody else.

Q. Coach, you open up the season, your first game an exhibition against a Black coach. Both of you are the most tenured coaches in Minnesota colleges.

Then you open up your regular season with Bethune-Cookman, another HBCU. Then you have two coaches in the conference. How important is that in your eyes that fans and media can see Black coaches leading their teams that's not HBCU, so to speak?

BEN JOHNSON: I think we always try to use our platform in every single way possible to expand diversity, whatever that diversity might look like. There's a lot of talented coaches across the country, whether it's at an HBCU or at a Power Five or a mid or low level that do a really phenomenal job.

So I think all of us kind of carry it as a badge of honor to do things the right way, to be competitive. I think we're excited for opportunities to showcase that and to kind of push the narrative and push the envelope and open eyes that regardless of what that diversity might look like, that there's a lot of people that are capable of performing and being really good coaches at any level.

Q. Pharrel Payne, a young sophomore, what are your expectations for him in taking that year-two leap for this program this year?

BEN JOHNSON: I have really high expectations of Pharrel. I think, again, last year there were a number of times when I told him, like, it's not going to get harder than it is right now. You know, to go against the likes of a hunter Dickinson and Edey, Steve Crowl. You can go down the line. As a true freshman, as an 18-year-old on a young team, it's only going up from where he was at. I think he needs to have confidence in that.

To get the experience that he got to be thrown into the fire, I think that's the best teacher. He is not a typical sophomore like the other two guys in Braden and Josh. Again, I think there's a confidence with that. He walks around with a certain type of aura to him. The anxiety is gone because he knows what it is.

Because of that, he does have expectations. The main thing is just to be able to compete. When you are able to go through it like he was last year, you understand how hard you have to play every single day, how hard you have to play in practice every single day, how you have to prepare conditioning, in the weight room, nutrition, film, on and on and on. You can talk about it as much as you want, but unless a kid goes through it, sometimes they don't really feel it.

Fortunately enough, he is one of one of the guys that went through it, and so he understands it. There's an urgency to him. So I'm just really excited for him and to see where he can take his game this year.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much for your time this year, Coach.

BEN JOHNSON: Thank you.

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