

Big 12 Conference Men's Basketball Tipoff Media Day

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Kansas City, Missouri, USA

Utah Utes

Coach Craig Smith

Media Day Press Conference



CRAIG SMITH: Well, first of all, thank you everyone for being here. Super excited to be a part of Big 12 conference. Can't tell you how excited personally I am and how players are super excited to be a part of the best men's basketball conference in the country.

Without a doubt, it has been five of the last six years. You look at the respect this league has earned, you look at the top 25 poll coming into this season, and 31 percent of our men's basketball teams are ranked in the top 10. I think that tells you a lot about this conference.

We've always had the mentality as a program and certainly as a head coach, bring on the competition. When you look around, so many historic programs, unbelievable venues, the pomp and circumstance that goes behind with our fan bases is absolutely second to none.

We're really excited to be a part of this thing. I'm really excited about our team.

Obviously we're not picked where you want to be picked, being in the spot that we were picked, but there's nowhere to go but up. I'm really excited about the guys in our program. We have great connectivity.

I just heard TJ talking earlier and they return a bulk of their guys. We're in the opposite boat. We return 31 percent of our scoring, 30 percent of our minutes played, so there is a lot of newness in our program. We have nine new guys in our program, but you would never know that. If you came to one of our practices, the connectivity and the togetherness that these guys exude, the chemistry that they have both in the locker room and on the floor, it's hard to describe it, but you just know it when you feel it.

I've been around this game for a long time, 29 years, going on 30. It's going to be my 14th year as a head coach. There's nowhere to go but up per se. I've been, like I said, 13 years as a head coach; two different times we've been picked last at a couple different spots and it's been a great

omen for us.

One year we went to the national tournament and one year we won the regular season conference championship. We got to go earn the respect. That's the bottom line, is you've got to earn respect and make that happen.

Super excited about this group. I think we're going to have -- not I think, I know we have a great style of basketball. It's a fun style. A lot of connectivity, a lot of freedom that we give our guys to play, and we pride ourselves on a GATA mentality. It's an old football acronym, Get After Their Butts. These guys have demonstrated that and exuded that there is a lot of work to be done, but we're excited where we're going.

Q. You have a stretch in February where you go to West Virginia and then you go to Cincy, you come back and you host the Kansas schools, and then you go to UCF and Arizona. How are you preparing your team for this travel dynamic in this expanded league?

CRAIG SMITH: Well, it's a great question. I was just talking to our director of ops yesterday on the way here. When we play UCF for example you got a stop and refill on the charter, and when you add it all together with the time-zone change, that's eight hours. You leave at noon, you're landing at 8:00 p.m.

But that's just part of it. You've got to adapt and adjust. You've got to be strategic, really try to figure are we going to leave the day before the game or two days before, how do we want to do it, are we going to practice when we get there, because that's a big change.

So we're working through all that. Obviously you alluded to West Virginia and Cincy. I think we play West Virginia on a Saturday at Cincinnati on a Tuesday, so same sort of thing. We're working through that.

But it's the same for everybody. A little bit more for us when you're a mountain time zone going to the east versus when you're in the middle of the country.

But they have to do the same with us and come out and

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play us and play at altitude, and there's some things that go along with that.

At the end of the day, we're a no-excuse program. We're going to put our guys in the best position to succeed in all facets. And so we're working through that all right now, but certainly it's another unique challenge.

Q. Year two you've got Lawson Lovering in the mix. What more do you expect out of him and does his role change with Brendan Charleston gone?

CRAIG SMITH: Great question. First of all, we love Lawson. Lawson is an amazing person. He's a really good player. I thought he made tremendous strides this summer and this fall. Our new assistant coach Josh Eilert who was the interim head coach at West Virginia last year coaches our big guys, and he's done a tremendous job with him. Lawson has just a tremendous attitude, an attitude that craves improvement. He really wants to be good.

But we just talked about this with our team, Lawson cares about one thing: He wants to win. He's a high achiever. I thought he's really taken the next step. He is moving way better. He is becoming a better athlete. A lot stronger. He's very, very physical. I expect him to score more for us and take a big step forward.

But then he has some traits that don't always show up in a stat sheet, maybe reporters or the fans don't always appreciate. But his ability to pass, he's a phenomenal defensive player. His ability to understand spacing on both ends of the floor is really, really high level. He just impacts winning in a major way.

Guys love playing with him. I always ask guys, who do you like playing with. I always ask guys, who do you love playing with. Almost to a man, Lawson Lovering is a guy they say.

He's had a great off-season. He's clearly improved in all facets of his game, and excited for him for this season.

Q. I wanted to ask how much preparation did you guys put into learning about the 12 teams in this conference over the summer? Did you break down film? What was your process in trying to get prepared for all this?

CRAIG SMITH: Yeah, great question. In a lot of ways you feel as a coach -- in some respects you feel like you're starting over. You're learning a whole new league.

I think this league has helped with recruiting. People want to be a part of the best league in the country.

But we put a lot of time into it. When our summer -- of course we have some familiarity. Last year we played Houston, and you see -- you can't help but not find Big 12 teams on TV no matter what. You're always paying attention to it, and of course in the NCAA Tournament you see these teams all the time.

We played BYU last year, as well.

But when summer was done, we did a lot of research on the stats, where they are nationally, where the teams are, where the league is as a whole, and then when our -- when we were done with our eight weeks of the summer, we have a lot of new coaches, assistant coaches on our staff, kind of they left to get moved to Salt Lake City and it was really quiet.

I literally sat and watched every team in our league, three to four games of each team, and really kind of stated everything out and did like a mini-scouting report on every team.

I've done a lot of research on it. It's a different brand of basketball than the Pac-12 over the last three years that we were used to, but it's exciting at the same time, and there's some things that you really have to do in this league to have success.

It's an incredibly physical league. You've got to really defend and rebound. There's not a lot of fouls called, and that's not a good or bad thing, it's just that's the style of play. You've got to be able to adapt and adjust to that.

Certainly looked at some of that stuff beforehand with the recruiting phase and understand what we need to have success that way, while at the same time recruiting to our brand of basketball and what's going to be successful for the Runnin' Utes.

Like I said at the top, really excited to be a part of this conference and put our best foot forward.

Q. What are your thoughts on Keanu Dawes and how he's adjusting to the program?

CRAIG SMITH: We love KD. Keanu is the ultimate teammate. He's trending like this. I think especially it's amazing just even looking back at pictures when he first came to campus and where he is now, just from a physical standpoint, like this dude is a relentless competitor, and he loves the game.

Like sometimes guys -- basketball finds them. He found basketball. He's a really versatile guy at 6'9". We recruited

him out of high school. He's got kind of a unique story. He grew up in Utah and he moves to Houston I think as a seventh grader. When our practice facility, which is approximately 10 years old when he was a little fifth or sixth grader he has a picture in front of our practice facility.

So that was really cool. I think when he made his announcement he posted that picture.

Every man in our program would tell you they love playing with KD. He's about all the right things. He's relentless. He's in the gym all the time.

He's one of those guys - this is a good problem to have - you've almost got to tell him to rein it back slightly. Not that we do that, but he's constantly in the game. He's obsessed about the game and he's obsessed about being the best that he can be.

We had a closed scrimmage the other day and I thought he played outstanding. He makes others better, and his upside is through the roof. We're super excited. He's only a sophomore. We're really excited about him being in our program.

Q. You alluded a little bit to it with recruiting and maybe the physicality of the Big 12 changing what you were looking for. Can you elaborate more on that and what changed for you in terms of what you were looking for this spring?

CRAIG SMITH: Yeah, obviously the league is so good. When you have five teams ranked in the -- and I've seen various polls where I think we've had nine or ten in the top 25. But it's a physical, rugged league and you know that you've got to play with physicality. You've got to have strength. We've always recruited to size.

I think two years I was at Utah State we had the tallest team in the country. We've always prided ourselves on being a very physical team. Having that physicality but yet having great skill, that's hard to find. Everybody is trying to get that, but I think we've done a good job over the years of identifying that and being able to do it.

But it's going to be -- it's a different notch. All high major basketball is physical, but certainly it's a different level, and we like to say it's big-boy basketball.

Expect the foul, not the call, so the number of times our guys have heard that over the last eight months or whatever, it's been a lot, but that's just the truth. You've got to be able to make tough-guy plays.

In any league of basketball but especially this league, the

toughest team usually wins the game. So we've got to pride ourselves on having great toughness both physically and mentally.

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