

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Arkansas Razorbacks

Mike Neighbors

Women's Media Day Press Conference

Q. Coach, there's a lot of talk about expanding the men's and women's tournaments; do you think the women's tournament should expand? I know it's going to 68 teams, but do you think that is a good thing? Is it going to dilute things? How do you feel about it?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: I think it should. I look at it as percentages. We have 359, I think, this year, and if we're only taking 64, it's a really low percentage of teams that have an opportunity.

I think it's the greatest experience that our student-athletes have a chance to experience, so I think adding more teams, maybe one more round, whatever number they decide on, but I do think it's time.

You look over just the history of how long it was 64, now you get to 68. I think the more student-athletes we can involve, the better. If that's just one more extra game or two more, whatever it is, I'm all for it, because it's truly -- when you've been there a few times and you see student-athletes that get to experience it, where they end up five, ten years afterwards versus kids who may not have experienced it, there's a significant difference.

I think giving this opportunity to more kids, anything we can do for that, I'd be behind it for whatever. Two more teams, 24 more, 32, whatever makes sense.

Q. Makayla was talking about the locked-in chain. What is the locked-in chain, and who was the inspiration for that?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: I'm not sure where the inspiration came from, but I brought one here -- they asked us to break it down. We went and bought these 25-cent little metal carabiners, and I've used them for keys and different things, but we have a focus problem sometimes in our



generation. I do. I know our kids do.

These things lock together, and we gave each player one and let them design it, color it, put sayings on it, whatever they wanted to do. But they bring it to practice, and if you're in our gym, whether you're our starting player or you're our volunteer graduate assistant athletic trainer, if you're not locked in -- if you don't have a carabiner in our chain that day, get on outta here.

It's a simple, cheap way, but when they win this, when they win the locked-in award from their teammates, you would have thought they won a Grammy or something. They give acceptance speeches. They dance. They take pictures. They wear it around their neck with pride.

In today's world of everything being so high dollar, a 30-cent carabiner goes a long way. We have a lot of fun with it. It may not be for everybody, but it fits our team's personality.

We are small in number, but when that chain gets linked together, it's a pretty cool little deal.

Q. You discussed the personality of your team. Can you talk more about that? What is this team's identity and how does that manifest on and off the court beyond just this?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Yeah, I think if you're there for a few days, the identity that we come out is work hard, have a good time doing it. We are not one of those -- we're probably not a good gym for young coaches to come in and pattern themselves after. It's not the loudest gym in the world. There's not always -- I've had people come and say, Your gym was kind of dead today, and that's just because there's not rah-rah energy going on. We're not into non-authentic energy.

Some days you're just down. And it's okay. So rather than fake it and create it, we try to battle through it.

So I think this group's identity is you have to -- I call them funguses. They grow on you. If you come one day, you're probably going to walk out of there and go, hmm, don't get it. But when you're there 10 or 15 days, you do get it.



They hold each other very accountable. We've stopped having goals a long time ago and started the world of standards. We burned our goals. There's a book out there, for anybody that's a goals person and you want to be challenged, read it.

But we've got a very small list of standards that we share with each other, and we hold each other accountable to it, and it kind of starts to show over time. You wouldn't notice it after one day. You wouldn't notice it after a shootaround.

But over the course of time, it takes on a unique identity that is ours.

Q. I saw the predicted order finish comes out, your squad is predicted to finish fourth in the SEC. It's the highest since 1996. What does that say about the state of your program and also the high expectation that people have for your squad this year?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Yeah, we have changed the expectation. That's the number one thing. I don't know how you could have picked 4th through 12th, to be honest with you. We have three teams that have clearly separated themselves in South Carolina, LSU and Tennessee, and I think the rest of us, it just depends on the day probably.

For us to finish fourth was really a surprise for us. We'll try to live up to those standards. We have a challenging schedule in doing so.

As you mentioned, I put it in perspective with just our legacy at Arkansas. Not in the grand scheme of things. It is the highest ranked since -- we've been 14 teams, and we've been fourth and fifth and fourth and fifth the last few years.

So I think it does mean something. It doesn't mean everything, but it also doesn't mean nothing. It means that the people that were asked to vote did their research and somehow landed with us at fourth. I wouldn't have put us there, but they did.

It's fun for our kids to see. I think they all want to finish higher. We all do, unless you're picked first and you want to downplay it.

But I think for us, it's those kids that have come over to our program, it's a little bit of validity. They made the right choice, and they've helped us build something that is not normally expected, and we'll do our best to try and finish there. If you can finish in that spot -- we've never earned a bye in the SEC tournament.

Arkansas, we've not done it in -- I think we're up to 33

years in the league now. That would be a legacy thing for us if we could somehow find a way to get a bye when it comes to SEC tournament time.

Q. I know you said -- I've seen that you guys have gotten longer in terms of length on this year's team. What's next for Arkansas?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Improving our defense. I think if you asked most people that followed us, we're known for the offensive side, and the defense is kind of a second thought. That's where we've got to start to catch people. I think we had to do what we did.

We were picked last my first year here. Dead last. Unanimous last. Even my friends told me that they didn't vote for us last. And then the numbers came out, and we had 13 votes.

So we were last, on all of them.

We've got to improve -- we had to do what we did offensively to get to the middle, and that's where we're kind of at.

Now, to get to the top of this league, you've got to play both sides. You look at what South Carolina does, they play both sides. Tennessee, LSU, those teams that were picked at the top play both sides.

So we've got to get our defensive identity, which will start with rebounding, and that size helps. That's, to me, the next step for us.

I think it's the next step, and it's winning some games in the NCAA Tournament, making it past the first round, getting a little bit deeper.

We focused on that, thus bringing it in. It's hard to recruit size. There's not as much of it. We've all seen the numbers declining toward volleyball across the country in youth sports, and a lot of that height is going to play volleyball. So that has shrunk the pool of available players to play basketball, and that very small pool goes to the top five or ten teams in the country every year.

We've been able to attract some of that talent to stay home. We were lucky that we had two 6'5" kids in Arkansas. It's never happened in the history of the world that we had two 6'5" girls basketball players at the same time and we got to keep those kids home. So now having them there and adding some pieces around them at the other positions, we look like our volleyball team more than our gymnastics team now, so that's a win.

Q. You have a relationship with Kelsey Plum. Can you discuss her winning a championship and that being the first one for Vegas?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Yeah, followed her obviously in all of her professional exploits and USA Basketball. She had a heck of a year. Won a championship. Was like MVP of the All-Star game, won two gold medals with the Olympics.

But when we text -- she texted me the other night about my two young kids. She saw a video of my two-year-old making a basket, and that's what we talk about.

But being able to follow through and let my kids know -- that's Kelsey that you see hanging in our game room, that's her jersey. Anybody that knows her knows that she was proud of her accomplishments but immediately turned it to what's next.

I've said it many places, many times before, I'm not a head coach, period, if she doesn't stay at the University of Washington when I got the head coaching job. She could have gone anywhere in the country. She had opened her commitment back up. She had her letter of intent back. She did not have to stay and play for a first-year, first-time head coach at the University of Washington.

I'm proud of her, proud for her. I will always be indebted to her for believing in me before I even believed in myself to be a coach.

All of her successes are fun to watch, and she's not done yet. I promise you, that kid is never satisfied. Until they win multiple this or she's on the national 5-on-5 Olympic team, she's always enjoyed the moment for about (snaps) that long, and then she's on to the next thing.

Expect bigger things out of her, even than what you've seen.

Q. You mentioned the declining numbers at younger ages in young girls playing basketball, shifting towards volleyball. What can be done to reverse that trend, and what is being done?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: I think the NCAA is making some efforts with their recruiting calendar. It had gotten so broad, it's become extremely expensive to be a youth basketball player. You have to travel a long way, you have to travel a lot. You feel like you have to travel all the time to be considered in the elite pool.

I think by shrinking that for everybody, we bring more kids back. It's expensive. I know if I were trying to fund -- luckily my son is going to be a nose guard. There's no

chance he's playing basketball. It's expensive, and it gets expensive at a young age.

I think as a result, volleyball had a smaller calendar. We play through all the great holidays, play through Thanksgiving, play through Christmas, if you're good you play until Easter, then 4th of July you're out. You're playing year-round if you're good in basketball.

And I think we've got to make some real conscious decisions to make sure it's affordable for everybody in the country and that we don't demand that it be a year-round thing. Otherwise, we're going to keep driving future potential basketball players into other sports. Other great sports; I'm not trying to hurt any other sport. I'm just saying I think that's where we got it wrong.

Q. You mentioned the expense of playing elite basketball for girls. Would you recommend if you had a daughter to spend that money on personal development in the game of basketball instead of traveling the country because coaches are still going to watch high school teams?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: You nailed it right there. Write a book. Expand that and write it and hope everybody picks it up.

It's science. They've proven that you're supposed to practice five times for every time you play. Practice to play model. That's in anything.

If they're playing 60 games, which is a low number for some kids, it's not even possible to practice five extra times for that. You reach a point of diminishing returns, and I think that's the model we've had, in an effort to try to help, but I think we've tipped over.

So yeah, if I had a daughter or son, anybody that was interested in it, I would spend more time in that, and I'd also spend more money on a family vacation, put them in a car and drive and make them listen to '80s music and stuff like that. Spend more time with them.

I mean, it's just -- this sport is not that hard. We complicate it. More time away from it, more downtime, more dead periods, I'd get behind that movement if anybody -- I've only got like six years' experience so nobody is going to ask me. But yeah, please write that and expand on it and hopefully everybody will pick it up.

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