

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Arkansas Razorbacks

Eric Musselman

Men's Media Day Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are ready to begin with Coach Musselman.

Q. I know how you feel about preseason polls, but you guys came in at No. 2 in the SEC Media Poll today. When you look around the returning talent in the league and then you look at your roster with the turnover, the youth that you have mentioned, what does it say about where you have the Arkansas program to be up there at the top?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Yeah, I mean, again, just like we talked to our team about yesterday, you know, the preseason polls, preseason conference rankings really are irrelevant.

How people come to those conclusions, everybody has their own reasons for how they rank or preseason national ranking (zoom freeze) what's happened in the preseason polls or the SEC preseason stuff is there's really great respect for our six freshmen and, obviously, the transfers that have come in.

And then, you know, how much the last two years influence people coming off back-to-back Elite Eights, I don't know, but I'm assuming it has a little bit of influence. Not that it should, because it's irrelevant to a new team, but you know, with rankings there does come some responsibility, and you have to understand when you play an opponent, your name is probably circled.

So as a team we're probably circled on a lot of schedules, and then individually we probably have some players that will be circled when people look at our roster. So you've got to understand the responsibility that comes with that by being overly mentally prepared, by being physically prepared. We did go through it at Nevada where 17 straight weeks we were in the top ten.



There's added pressure, let me put it like that. So how you can alleviate some of that pressure, meaning our coaching staff and any of us that are in leadership position, we have to make sure that the guys enjoy the season as well.

Q. I think you've coached 101 games at Arkansas. What have been some of the keys to getting the program to where you want it? And then what is going to carry it into the future the way that you want it?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I think just coming every day understanding there's a process. In the summer it's a process. Once the season hits, it's a process.

Right now in college basketball or college football, whatever, you always have to have a short-term plan, and then you also have to have a long-term plan that has some type of sustainability, however you're going to -- whatever that sustainability is going to be for a long-term plan.

We feel like we've had three really good years, but in today's world it's what are we going to do the next game and then the next game after that and just try to take each game as they come on the schedule.

And then the biggest key is how do you improve as a team throughout the course of a season.

Q. As far as the league, five teams are ranked. A&M is right there at 26. I know, obviously, the season hasn't started yet, but how good do you think the league is going to be? How challenging have you found it, your first three years, and then how good do you think it's going to be this year?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I think the league is phenomenal. Star players. Players that are going to play in the NBA, you look at the NBA Draft the last few years. Incredible coaching.

As a league, if you have really good coaches and you have NBA-level talent and then you have institutions that have great credibility nationally, I know that the SEC is an incredible football conference, but it's also an incredible basketball conference.

You know, every single night that you play somebody, that



particular team in our conference can beat anybody. Not just in conference, but anybody in our league I think could beat anybody nationally as well.

It's a difficult conference to play in and win at a high level.

Q. Something that Razorback baseball did that was interesting is they played the Texas Rangers instructional team --

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I wish we could play a couple of NBA teams too, but I'll let those teams -- we won't name them.

Q. When it comes to your exhibitions, games against Texas on the road and, of course, going overseas, what's the process like that? And also, would there be a way you could pull off playing some sort of professional, semi-professional teams in an exhibition?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I think that -- I mean, everything right now is evolving, but obviously the baseball that you are referring to -- because I do have some friends that work with the Rangers' Minor League system, and most of those guys -- a lot of those guys were younger even than the college guys. So the way that the baseball format is set up is just you can't equate the Dominican League and some of the different things, having three levels or maybe four, I guess, if you go rookie ball, instructional league.

And in basketball there's just the G League basically. I don't think really -- it doesn't line up like college baseball teams playing one of the younger Minor League group of players.

But I do think the international stuff that we were able to do this year is great from a lot of things. It breaks up the monotony of what I think is way too long of an offseason in college basketball. The playing a charity exhibition is going to be really, really good. I'm glad that we're able to did play another Division I team.

For us that particular game against Texas is extremely important. Coach Beard does a great job. His teams are overly physical. This year's Longhorns team has got really an experienced team. You look at their back court, and I don't know how old Marcus Carr is, but I remember him at Minnesota, and they have some transfers that are really, really experienced.

And for our young guys, that's a great opportunity for us to go have tape to fall back on. No different than coaching in an NBA exhibition game. That game is not going to count on your record whether you win or lose.

So it's a great -- it holds great value to us because we can look at different combinations and maybe some things that we wouldn't do in a regular season game.

Q. You had many years of coaching in the D-League as well as the CBA. Do you think that equips you much better to handle this transfer portal, an age where there's a lot of player movement on your roster?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I hope so. When you coach in the Minor Leagues, you wake up one day, and your top three players might be gone. So you've got to -- it changes the way that you teach. It changes the way that you implement a system.

So, again, just looking at our own team with only two returners, a lot of the format that we've used this summer in implementing things both offensively and defensively is much the same that we used while coaching in the Minor Leagues.

And certainly a changing, fluctuating roster, I don't flinch with that at all. Probably healthy that they hear a different voice every couple of years or whatever. So maybe the way that college basketball is right now with the freedom of movement with players is kind of equivalent to free agency at the pro level. And maybe with my background, I'm more equipped to coach today than maybe I would have been 20 years ago in college.

Q. A couple of big ideas people have for your sport. One, summer basketball. And, two, expanding the NCAA tournament field. Just your thoughts on both of those ideas.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: On the summer basketball, I think it's an awesome idea. Talking to our players, even this week, it's really hard to have this gap between games, and we played a few weeks longer than other people even. I can't imagine if your season ends on the last regular season game. So I think it's a great idea.

You look at what the NBA has done where they take over July. Incredible what they've done from a TV standpoint. People are talking about the NBA Summer League in Las Vegas rather than talking about Major League Baseball during their regular season. I know Coach Calipari has been outspoken about the idea. And he has discussed it not just recently, he discussed it a few years ago as well.

I think that's the brilliance in Coach Cal is he is an outside-the-box thinker. He is constantly trying to evolve and evolve our game.

I think it's an incredible idea, and I think that, most

importantly, that our players would embrace that.

I like the tournament field like it is. You know, growing up with my dad as a college coach, there used to be half the teams that there are now. You know, I think it's a perfect number in my opinion. It's hard to make the NCAA tournament. There's value in the regular season. So I really, really like it a lot.

I think that you always want to change, you want to evolve with the times, but certain things -- I mean, it's really working well right now for everybody involved.

So I don't know, again, just my opinion. I don't know why you would want to change it, but ...

Q. What did last year's win over Auburn mean for the development, first of all, of last year's team, and then overall for the program, the historic nature of it, beating the No. 1 team, et cetera?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I think that any time you have a sold-out building and you can beat the No. 1 team in the country, I think it heightens the awareness nationally.

You know, I think we're the first team to do that in the regular season and then also do it in the NCAA tournament by beating Gonzaga. I certainly think the Gonzaga win from a national standpoint, because it was in the NCAA tournament, that nationally it put us in a conversation.

But Auburn had a really talented team last year. I think it gave our team confidence as well.

Q. Nick Smith has been someone projected to be one of the top picks in this year's NBA Draft. I guess how was he handling those high expectations, and what do you kind of expect to see from him this season?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Yeah, Nick is -- I think he is used to playing with expectations throughout his high school career. He has had high expectations. You know, he is a player that kind of moves on the floor effortlessly almost like he is on skates. He is cosmetically pleasing to watch offensively with the way that he can find seams in the defense, and he is a really good shooter as well. Can play both the point guard or the off guard for us, and obviously has an incredible bright future as well.

Q. Eric, Kamani played pretty well over in Europe. How has he played since then? The other day in the red-white game, he took a couple of charges, but he picked up a lot of fouls. Where is the fine line between you want a physical guy, but you don't want him to foul out in five minutes? How do you handle that with

him, and how do you feel about him at this point, the preseason?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: The one thing about Kamani is what anybody that's an Arkansas Razorback basketball fan has seen from Kamani, that's exactly what you see in practice behind closed doors.

He is physical. You know, he does like to mix it up underneath the rim. He is an excellent offensive rebounder. He provides toughness.

I guess the good thing is this year we have a couple of other big guys, where in the past we haven't. So if he gets five fouls in five minutes, we can throw somebody else in there because we haven't had much depth, and we probably have more depth than we have the past three years as far as up front with bigs.

Q. Wanted to ask you about the use of analytics. You are kind of an "it" guy for that. You guys apparently chart everything and do a lot of reports. Talk about how you use that, and if you are still kind of -- is that a development in progress? Are you always looking at other things you maybe should be following, et cetera?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I think from an analytics standpoint, I often laugh with Tom Thibodeau, who is the New York Knicks coach, because analytics has been around for a really long time. My father had his own way to evaluate rebounds per minute, a formula that he didn't share with a lot of people.

I had an opportunity to work with Hubie Brown one summer. Hubie Brown was the most analytically driven coach that I have ever been around. And, you know, you are talking about somebody that coached a long time ago.

But, yes, we have. As the games evolve, we want to evolve. The mid-range shot and the value of that, we like to study and learn. But Billy Bean is a guy that was a neighbor of ours when I lived in the Bay Area and was really intrigued to pick his brain this summer.

My son and I met with Brandon Staley, who, obviously, is at the forefront for the NFL on how he deals with decision-making based on analytics. Phil Nevin, who is an Angels manager, I was with him on four different road trips with the Angels. Just hearing him discuss with his coaches from both the defensive side pitching-wise and then offensively pitches to take, pitches not to take, it's really fascinating.

That part of our game continues to grow. But having said that, I still think having a feel for the game supersedes all

of that.

Analytics is part of our game in all sports, and obviously, baseball started it and then basketball got involved and now the NFL is involved in it.

Plus, we don't want Todd Golden to be the only one in the SEC talking about analytics.

Q. I know earlier you talked about needing to be patient with this team, especially with six freshmen. How do you think you've done in that regard?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: How do you think I've done, Bob?

Q. I think you're really trying hard (laughing).

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I am trying hard. We have slowed down our teaching to a snail's pace at times. Patience is going to be a word all year long because 6 out of 13 freshmen is a lot.

It's new for me. It might not be new for maybe some other coaches in college, but it is new for me.

We've historically had a veteran-laden team, whether it was at Arkansas or even Nevada. But our teams also have tended to get better as the season has progressed, and you would think with six young players -- and it's not just the six freshmen. You know, Brazile, a transfer from Missouri, has only played one year of college basketball. Ricky Council is still a young player.

Across the board we're really, really young, and hopefully we get better, but I think patience is a word that we use oftentimes in our staff meetings (smiling).

Q. Coach, where have you seen the greatest, I guess, benefits of the transfer portal and where have you seen the weaknesses, and are you for banning the shift? You were talking about baseball earlier.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I think with the transfers -- it's not just college athletics. Many of the players that we are recruiting, meaning an SEC baseball coach, an SEC football coach, SEC -- like, a lot of our future prospective student-athletes have played for multiple high schools, multiple AAU programs, oftentimes have played in multiple states before they go to college.

So that's the way it is. You look at professional sports. You know, you think about great players that played for maybe one franchise in Major League Baseball or the Pittsburgh Steelers and guys that just stayed there for 15 years. NBA players, the Larry Birds that stay with one --

like that's not how the NBA is. That's not how Major League Baseball is.

Free agencies change. College athletics -- because I've only been in it really for seven years as a head coach, and each year keeps going closer and closer to the professional model as far as players now having the ability and the freedom to play at multiple institutions.

I think it's good. I mean, I think the players should have the right to leave if they don't have the role that they want.

My son is a senior at the University of San Diego. He doesn't play athletics, but if he wants to transfer next month to Pepperdine, he can do it, and there's not a problem. He is the same age as these guys.

As far as that and then the name, image, and likeness, I think it's a good thing for the student-athletes. Hopefully there will be a clearer picture on it as we move into the future, but I think it's a good thing for student-athletes in all regards.

Q. Before Ricky Council signed with you guys, I talked to him, and he said whatever league that he joined, he wanted to try to win Defensive Player of the Year. I'm curious what kind of a defender you have seen him be, and what is his defensive potential?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I think defensively with Ricky, he is a great athlete. He has great anticipation. I think he still is learning a lot of our defensive concepts: Where we're trying to force the ball, what our second and third rotations look like, how we X out from the weak side.

I mean, there's a lot of areas that Ricky is, as is all of our new guys, he is still learning. But from an athletics standpoint, from a toughness standpoint, to be a great defender, you have to be willing to fight through screens.

I think the one thing with Ricky is he comes from the same AAU program as Au'Diese Toney, and I think he saw that Au'Diese turned into one of the best defenders in all of college basketball. The way that Au'Diese defended in the NCAA tournament against Gonzaga, I mean, it was as good a defensive individual player that we've seen or we've had. And I think that Ricky aspires to do that as well.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Thank you.

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