

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Alabama Crimson Tide

Nate Oats

Men's Media Day Press Conference

NATE OATS: It's good to be here. It's good to be back. It's the first media day since my first year, so things are looking like they're back to normal, which is great.

We're looking forward to the year. We've got a good young group, got a lot of new faces, and we've got 12 kids on scholarship. Only four of them ever played a game for Alabama before, and Quinerly is out till maybe SEC play sometime in December with an ACL. So we'll have three guys that have ever played a game for us suit up for our first game. That's Darius, Charles, and Noah.

What that means, we've got eight new faces, four freshmen. The other ones are all transfers. Need a lot of production out of the new faces, so I think you'll see some -- maybe at the beginning of the year, there may be some games we're a little inconsistent.

I think we've got a lot of room for growth, and we're looking to try to be peaking at the end of the year.

Might go through a few growing pains early. We've got a tough non-conference schedule to get us ready, but we're looking forward to it.

I'll open it up for any questions.

Q. Since the trip to Spain and France, how have you seen your team grow, and what did you get out of the secret scrimmage against TCU?

NATE OATS: So since the trip, we've been able to do a lot more. We got a head start being the 10 practices in the summer and the games over there. But we'll put a little bit more in. I think certain guys didn't play as well as they thought on the trip have been a little more motivated, been in more. So we've been working.

The scrimmage with TCU, I believe they've got the most



production back of any high major team in the country, so they had a couple sixth-year guys and a lot of real veteran guys. So we had a lot of young guys. Charles and Nimari have some minor injuries, so we held them out of that scrimmage. They'll be fine, though.

When you took those two out and Quinerly out, there's three guys that potentially could be starters that didn't play. So we're playing a lot of really young players, and I think it was a welcome to high major basketball from some veteran guys.

First half was a little rough, and then the second half we played a lot better. Brandon Miller was really good in the second half. That's why we do it. We strategically schedule who we schedule, and I think we did it for a reason. I want our guys to play against tough teams, whether it's the non-conference, the preseason scrimmage and all that.

We'll be better for it, though. It was good for us.

Q. The media put out that you guys were fifth in the SEC. I was wondering, with all the question marks that you talked about in your opening statement, is that a fair assessment going in, or do you look at that stuff at all?

NATE OATS: You know what, I did happen to see that on the drive down here today. I mean, doesn't really matter what they put you at preseason. It matters what happens once the games start playing. I think our potential is there to be one of the best teams in the SEC and challenge for a title.

Now, potential doesn't mean a whole lot if you don't get any production out of it once you start playing games.

So we're excited about our team, but we've got a lot of work to do.

I do think you'll see a lot of growth from us non-conference up until conference just because of our youth and inexperience. I think a lot of those freshmen will get a lot better, more so than a guy that's played four or five years.

Shoot, you got it with the COVID deal, now you've got kids



playing their fifth year. We got one in Dom Welch, and guys that are in their sixth year if they had a redshirt year and with the COVID year, they're in their sixth year of college basketball.

There's just a lot of veteran guys out there, and I think you'll see a lot more growth with some of the freshmen who haven't played college basketball before. So hopefully that happens for us.

Q. You mentioned a few weeks back if guys aren't going to guard, they're not going to play. How have you seen guys responding to that, and also just improving defensively?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I think they've got it up here. We need to see it being flushed out on the floor. TCU was the first time we played somebody else, and we've got some work to do on that end. TCU put a little pressure on our young guys on the defensive end. Some guys need to take some more individual pride in their individual defense.

But in practice, I think our guys are playing hard against each other. I think they know it. I think the biggest way they'll see it is the first game when we've got plenty of guys healthy and minutes are distributed accordingly. And you can't guard and you're not going to guard, your minutes are not going to be what you'd like them to be.

I think that's the first time they'll really be able to see. But I think guys are working to try to make themselves better defenders in practice right now.

Q. Along the lines of your overseas trip, what are your thoughts on the proposal for summer basketball every year? And also one of the other big ideas right now, expanding the NCAA Tournament field.

NATE OATS: The summer basketball I think would be great. To be honest with you, they let us work our guys out. Your guys are on campus, I don't know of any high major team in the country, any Division I team that doesn't have their players on campus all summer. If we're going to have them on campus all summer, I don't see why we couldn't play. I'm sure there's a lot that goes into it, but most of the other sports, softball, they have fall softball, baseball has fall baseball. I believe volleyball has games when it's not their season.

It's not like it's something new for an NCAA sport to allow teams to play games when it's not in their competition season.

I think -- and Calipari has brought this up a couple years at our meetings, and he's got a good point. There's a huge

void of sports on TV in August. There's no NFL yet, college football is not going, NBA is not going, Major League Baseball hasn't started their playoffs yet. I don't watch any sports in August. The NBA has got the NBA Summer League, which I watch. I don't know how many of you watch, but I like watching it. So there's something going in July, it would be nice if we could do something. Whether it's August or whatever, I think it would be great.

Then expanding the NCAA field, that's going to be left up to people above me. I don't have an opinion one way or the other. I do see every year I get on KenPom and I go to the bottom, and it seems like there's more and more Division I teams, whatever, 363 there is now. Division I is growing.

So maybe with the growth of Division I -- I don't know how many leagues, and they expanded it a little bit. It would probably be fairly easy to expand it a little bit more. I don't know how big they're expanding it -- or talking about expanding it.

But it would be more TV revenue, I'm sure, if there was more NCAA Tournament games, which are huge for TV. I'll let that be decided by some other people.

But summer games I think would be great. In my opinion we've got way too much practice against ourselves, whether it's all summer, all fall. We get six weeks of practice, and you can only have two competition scrimmage, exhibition, whatever, against somebody else.

I go to NBA training camps, they've got first day of practice and they're playing a game that same week. I'm not sure you need six weeks of practice with only two exhibition or scrimmages in there. I wouldn't be opposed to being able to play some more exhibitions, scrimmages, playing other teams instead of playing against yourself all the time in the offseason.

Q. Your team had some really good big wins during last season, but the postseason really didn't pan out the way anybody thought it would for Alabama. How much of a chip on their shoulder do you think that your returning players have after last season?

NATE OATS: I mean, they should have a big chip on their shoulder. We proved we could play with the best in the country. We played three previous years' Final Four teams and went 4-0, beat Gonzaga, Baylor, Houston. But we had some inconsistencies about us. We had some injuries late in the year. Obviously Quinerly blowing his knee out less than three minutes into the first round of the NCAA Tournament game didn't help anything.

But even before that, we weren't playing our best

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

basketball come March, which that was my -- what was that, my seventh year as a Division I head coach, and typically most of my teams have been peaking at the end. We won three out of four MAC tournaments, and we won the SEC tournament, the only one that we were able to play in, our second year up until last year. But we definitely were not playing our best basketball.

That's one of our goals is to try to be peaking at the right time this year. Let's not peak in December and January. We've got to be strategic with how we manage player loads, all that, practice and all that.

But a lot of it's more mental, just like you said, having a chip on your shoulder and wanting to prove something.

We really only have four guys that played a game here before, and I think they all have something to prove. Quinerly was the only one that played significant minutes on the team that won the SEC championship, and he kind of went out with an injury, and now he's got something to prove to prove he can get back to the same place he was before his injury.

We've got a lot to prove this year.

Q. You talked about the number of new players, newcomers. How have you seen the chemistry work out with everybody coming together?

NATE OATS: I think we've got a really good group of guys. I think they really want to see each other do well. I like the chemistry. Now, we haven't had to play many games where guys don't get the minutes, the shots, whatever, that maybe they envisioned, so it's a lot easier to have great chemistry in the middle of October than it is the middle of February, January. But so far, I think they're good.

You go on a foreign trip, they hung out a lot. You see guys wanting to spend time with each other. You see them in the gym together, on their own, when it's not required stuff. They're kind of getting in there with each other.

So I like our group. I like the chemistry. I think we've got good guys that way, and hopefully it continues throughout the year when times get a lot tougher and guys personally face some adversity, whether it's an injury or not playing that much, and can they still continue to cheer their teammates on when they personally aren't getting as much done this year as maybe what they would have thought.

Q. How many metrics are important to you? And let's say name three that must change for you this year to have a good team.

NATE OATS: Yeah, I mean, we look at a lot of different metrics. I think if you're talking about important ones to us, our shot selection, where we're getting our shots from is a big one, where the opponents are getting their shots from is a big one. Defensive and offensive rebounding percentages, which would lead into one of the things we need to improve is defensive rebounding percentage, and then your turnover rate is a big one, too.

I think our defensive efficiency in year two was third in the country, I think we were 92nd last year. Our defensive rebounding has got to get better. Our turnover rate on the defensive end and offensively have to get better. We have to turn it over less and we've got to somehow force teams to turn it over a little bit more.

And then the other big one that's got to change this year has got to be our three-point percentage. We take a lot of threes. We didn't shoot it great last year. That three-point percentage has to come up. And we know it. We've recruited to it. We went to the portal and got some shooters out of the transfer portal, and we need some guys playing in games that can make shots.

Q. Having so many newer faces on this year's team, how might that -- does that make it easier to wipe the slate from last year's NCAA result? Or how might that change expectations?

NATE OATS: You know what, the guys that have come in, and we've got eight new players, one of them, Nimari, was with us last year, just couldn't play because of the injury.

I think they were all pretty invested in our program, most of them, because they knew they were coming because they had signed with us early. I think they were upset about it, to be honest with you. I think most people in the program are pretty upset with how we finished. We finished on a four-game losing streak. With all the great wins we had, three-game losing streak, they still give us a 6 seed in the NCAA Tournament, then we lose in the first round. We end on a four-game losing streak.

It's not the way we anticipated finishing the year. I think everybody has got a little bit of a sour taste in their mouth, including the new guys.

There hasn't been a ton of talk, but guys know that there's certain things they had to change, stuff in the culture had to change, and I think the returners have made that clear. They've said we're not going to have certain things this year, and I think so far they've done a pretty good job holding the new guys and themselves both accountable.

We're looking to have a little bit better NCAA Tournament,

SEC tournament finish than what we did last year.

Q. I know you were in on Nick Smith and he decided to stay home and play for Arkansas. What do you think of him as a player and what can he do for Arkansas and just how big an impact he could have for them?

NATE OATS: He's a really good player. We recruited him hard, and he ended up going to Arkansas, staying home and going there.

I watched him play a lot. He played with Brandon Miller on the same AAU team. So we ended up getting Brandon, who's a real special player himself.

But Nick is a big guard with a lot of talent, a lot of ability. Somebody I think told me today they saw some draft report where he's projected to be the third pick in the draft possibly. NBA is looking for big guards that can do what he does.

And I think he's going to be an impact player in our league. I saw him predicted to be First Team All-SEC. He's got that type of talent. And Arkansas is loaded. I'm not sure whether they're going to play him on ball, off ball, whatever, but he can do both. He can score and he can distribute.

But yeah, I think he's one of the better freshmen in the country, and I think he'll prove that as he goes through SEC play.

Q. You talked about your past teams kind of peaking at the end of the year. How much do you feel the strength of schedule last year, No. 1 strength of schedule in the nation, helps compound to that poor finish, and will that change your philosophy?

NATE OATS: No, I don't think it had anything to do with it, to be honest. I think if you don't -- we played tough teams when I was at Buffalo. Shoot, you had to play tough teams. You had to go get bought at that level to go on the road and get -- essentially get paid to get beat.

If you can kind of go through that and still be peaking at the end, there's no reason -- our tough non-conference schedule, we've still got a lot of home games, a lot more home games than I ever was able to play at Buffalo.

I think more was just a mindset of bringing it every game, not feeling yourself after a big -- you beat Gonzaga, everybody thinks they've got everything figured out. Then you don't play as poorly, you get a tough win against a good Houston team. We were up and down, we get ourselves peaked. We beat Baylor. We had a little bit of complacency after some of those big wins.

I don't think playing a few tough teams -- because if you look, our non-conference schedule is really tough again. But it's not every single game. We've got teams that we should win, that we've kind of bought, paid to come to -- what you do at a high major level.

But you've got to bring it in those games, you've got to bring it every game. There's teams in our league that last year lost some bye games. Here, my first game ever, we lost to Penn.

You've got to get a mentality with your group that you have to bring it every night. I don't think playing some tough games in the non-conference -- to me, it's not like you get X number of bullets to use up and you use them up. No, you should be getting better. You don't get X number of bullets. You get what you deserve every night out.

When you bring it every night out, you're going to play well. When you decide you don't have to play very hard because you think you're a lot better than this team, you end up doing what we did, and that's why, in my opinion, we didn't peak at the end.

So I've got to do a better job as a head coach of making sure complacency doesn't enter when we do have a good win. It's a lot harder to handle success sometimes than it is to handle failure. You're going to get their attention after they get beat. Can you still get their attention and get them to practice as hard as they need to and stay focused after big wins like we had last year.

I didn't do a good enough job doing that, and we've got to do a better job as a program of doing that this year.

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