

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



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Alabama and we'll go straight to questions for Coach Oats.

Q. As far as your defense this season, you talked last year Charles Bediako was a big anchor for you guys. Do you have any sense of who could be an anchor for this defense this year?

NATE OATS: That's a good question, and we've talked a lot about defense with our guys. Been at Alabama four years. Two of the four we've been ranked in the top 3 of the country in defensive efficiency. Those are the two years we won the SEC regular season, tournament, both.

When we've been good defensively, we've had really successful years. Our point with our guys, we got to be great defensively. We've done it two different ways. Three years ago we didn't really have an anchor like that, but we had Herb Jones, who was covering a lot of mistakes. Last year Charles covered a lot of mistakes. Put him at the rim, protected the rim well. We were able to take away threes.

We don't have a Herb Jones and we don't have a Charles Bediako. To answer your question about who's going to anchor it, there's some different options. Nick Pringle has really improved, fouling a lot less. We need him to foul less and protect the rim more. He's getting better after that.

I think the transfer, Mohamed Wague, can do some of that too. He hasn't been healthy. Came with an injury from West Virginia, so we haven't been able to have him out there in live drills yet. He's about there to get him out there live. I think he can do some of that.

Between the two of those would be our best two options to provide some real presence at the rim like Charles had. We may have to do things a little bit differently. Maybe not quite send everything down to the rim like we were able to

do last year. Maybe play a little bit more like we did three years ago when we were also third in the country in defense.

We're experimenting with some stuff. We have a good staff. We're trying to figure it out. We do need to figure it out if we plan on winning at the level we want because when our defense has been good, that's when we've been able to win at that level.

Q. You mentioned Wague. Can you update us on the health of the rest of the team? It looked like Dioubate got back out there a little bit earlier in the week. Tell us who all is healthy and where they all stand.

NATE OATS: So we definitely got to get healthy. We had both Mohameds, Wague and Dioubate. Both required procedures once they got to campus with previous injuries that we weren't aware of.

Dioubate has been able to participate in some live things in practice. He's still not going up and down live scrimmage. But he's close. He had a knee issue. Wague had an issue with his foot. He's still not doing anything live.

The both of them are on pace to be able to play in game one. Both of them, the time frame was to get them healthy just in time for game one. We think they'll both be there for game one.

Everybody else we should have by game one. Everything else is minor, an ankle tweak, a groin pull, a hip flexor. I can't go through it. We've had a lot of different just minor injuries. Everybody is not going to be available for our closed scrimmage and our exhibition game. We do think everybody should be available by game one, though.

Q. (No microphone.)

NATE OATS: He's been one that has been in and out here and there. He's had different things. He's practicing now. He's a guy that plays so hard and so physically. He's a tough, physical guard. He doesn't shy away from anything. He kind of puts himself in there to get some nicks and bruises here and there. For people who watched practice,

he may not have been practicing that particular day. He's had I think three different injuries that have kept him out of various times since he's been here.

He's practicing. He practiced today. Yeah, he should be available. Got a closed scrimmage. Should be available for that. Hopefully he'll be available for the exhibition against Wake Forest.

Q. You had staff turnover this year at almost an unprecedented rate. How are you still able to succeed in the transfer portal and pitch to those players when it was just you for an amount of time and you were still building your staff?

NATE OATS: That's a good question.

I thought we did an unbelievable job in the transfer portal. We got four transfers that are all going to contribute significantly. I think the staff that we put together, while it may have taken some time, I think we got it right.

I'm super happy with the staff we got. Kind of going in order of the guys we hired, Austin Claunch was the first one we hired. Austin is from Texas. Coached in Louisiana. Nicholls won the Southland two of the last three years. If you understand that league, it's not easy to do. Real low budget. He kind of did it with sheer willpower and outworked anybody. He's got a ton of energy.

We hit the portal. He was the one guy I hired that had been in college last year.

Ryan Pannone was an assistant with the Pelicans. I think everybody up here that's in the basketball knows who he is. He was head coach for the Pelicans G League team here in Birmingham, the Squadron. But he works really hard. We were able to get on some Zooms with some transfer guys. He was able to get in there with Grant Nelson particularly, one of his that he kind of targeted. Grant took a while. Grant is trying to make it to the NBA. He was real close to staying in the draft this year. Having a guy that's been in the NBA, that's developed guys to play in the NBA, that's Ryan's background. Started in player development, and he's great at it. That certainly helped.

Go to a guy like Preston Murphy, one of the best recruiters in college basketball really since I've been involved in Division I, all the way back to my days in Romulus. Preston is from Saginaw, recruited my kids when I was at Romulus. I think he's one of the best coaches, recruiters in the country.

He didn't get hired till later. But we were able to, with the staff we had in place, recruit some of these transfers.

The transfers a lot of times are looking to be able to play professionally. I think the staff we put together is going to be able to help get them there. Aaron Estrada was a CAA Player of the Year back-to-back years. That's not easy to do. I coached similar level at Buffalo. Every Player of the Year in the MAC could have come here and started at Alabama.

To get Aaron was big. Latrell Wrightsell from Fullerton, two years left, huge. A tough, physical guard. We like to have that on the defensive side. He's pretty talented on offense, too. Averaged over 15 a game at Fullerton. Talked about Grant a little bit.

The last one we were able to get, a couple of guys we got late. Wague we got late when the portal opened up back for him at West Virginia. He's super athletic, can give us some of that rim protection. We lost Charles late, so we needed to replace him late. He was kind of a perfect replacement for Charles.

Q. How challenging is it with the three assistant coaches and the newcomers to get your system implemented? How much time are you spending coaching to coaches of your system?

NATE OATS: That's a good question, too, just 'cause you got to get everybody on the same page. When you spend so much of your time recruiting, both the transfers, the current team, then trying to get in on the class of '24, you don't have as much time as you'd like to sit down and talk your basketball.

Got three guys that are really sharp with basketball. We sit down and meet, kind of answer a bunch of questions. They've got a lot of questions. How do we do it here? Kind of tell 'em how we did it here, but I'm open for discussion based on our current roster as to what is there a better way to do it with our current roster.

The way we've done it here has changed from year to year, too.

I don't necessarily know that I've educated them on everything, but we've definitely talked about how we've done it, and how they've done it places they've been. With our current roster, what does it look like, what would be the best way to do it.

There's been plenty of discussion. There's more discussion every day. Yeah, the staff meetings definitely take longer with the new staff 'cause the previous staff, pretty used to each other, can get through 'em quick. I think the longer staff meetings with more questions and

answers makes you think about more things, which in turn I think can make you better.

Q. Last year when we were here you were in the middle of the pack by the media, won the SEC. Lost some players. We're here in Birmingham again, middle of the pack, higher. What does this team look like this year?

NATE OATS: What were we picked this year?

Q. Fifth.

NATE OATS: Fifth this year? What were we picked last year?

Q. Fifth.

NATE OATS: Fifth. What were we picked going into '21, my second year? I think we were picked fifth. If I remember correctly. Maybe I'm wrong. Go ahead and look it up. It was fifth going into my second year?

Q. Yes.

NATE OATS: There you go. We've been picked three times, picked fifth three times now. Shows how smart you guys are, so... I'll take fifth (smiling). If you can pick us fifth again next year, that would be great.

I mean, look, I think the pre-season polls are great. We like to get a lot of fan interest around the programs. I think SEC basketball has been raised to a new level at a record number of teams in the tournament. I think a lot of this stuff is to generate fan interest. If you want to generate some fan interest, go ahead.

I think, especially with the portal, it's really hard to predict how good different teams are going to be. See some super talented freshmen, and I think you see some really talented freshmen that don't end up being as good as what everybody thought they were going to be. You have freshmen like Noah Clowney, if you go look and you're rankings last year, might have been the lowest-ranked kid, ends up going 21st in the draft after one year with us.

It's hard to predict pre-season stuff. You have to do it. Generates fan interest. Let's do it. But we can use fifth to motivate us, disrespectful, it is what it is. There's some other really good teams in our league that are picked ahead of us, other good teams picked behind us.

Look at Vanderbilt last year. Look at where they were picked and where they finished. I think Stackhouse did an unbelievable job. Coach of the Year voting, I went to see

who made the biggest jump pre-season to where they actually finished. I think he did a better job than anybody which is why he had my vote.

Would I like to be picked fifth and finish first again? Yes, I would. That's our goal. But I think that's 14 teams' goal to finish first.

We ended up out-performing. When they picked us a little higher one year, we performed less than what they thought.

What matters is how I play when the ball tips up here in three weeks and how you play in SEC games. That's what we're concerned with, getting better every day.

Q. This year veteran leadership, Mark Sears, a Muscle Shoals guy. What does he mean to your team this year? What have you seen out of his growth?

NATE OATS: He's our leading returner scorer. He was our second scorer behind Brandon Miller last year. One kid from Alabama. He's been great for us. Plays hard. Can really shoot it.

He tested the draft. Worked out for some NBA teams. Got some feedback. We're trying to work with him on what he would need to do to make it at that level.

To me, it would be great for a kid from Muscle Shoals that didn't have any high major offers coming out of high school, went to Ohio, we were able to bring him back home. If we could help him achieve his dream of playing in the NBA, it would be great.

He's already won the SEC in his home state school at Alabama. We need him to lead. We need him to be better than he was last year. He was really good for us. And he knows that. He's been more vocal, been a better leader for us. It's hard to say he's improved his shooting, but he improved his shooting. We're working on some more play-making abilities.

We don't really have a true point guard, per se, with the way we play, as fast as we play. We have multiple handlers. He needs to have some more point guard responsibility, show he can play in pick and roll a little bit better, get downhill. We're working with that with him. Trying to get his defense better.

We need him to have a great year for us. I think he expects to. I think he's primed to have a really good year for us.

Q. Is this going to be one of your taller teams that you

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

coached? If so, was that an emphasis, change in your offense and defense? Do you like the transfer portal? It's here to stay, but do you enjoy the roster change every year?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I think it will be one of our tallest overall. We had some size last year starting with Brandon Miller, 6'8" at the three, could play him at the two, played some one even. I think we can do that with Grant Nelson, play him all over. 6'11". Jarin Stevenson can play a similar role at 6'10", 6'11", as what Noah Clowney played. Pringle, Wague inside there. We got some longer guards. Sam Walters can play 2-3 at 6'9". Rylan has grown, he's 6'6".

Yeah, we have some length. Will it change how we play? We're always tweaking things a little bit. There's going to be no significant changes. We're going to play fast. We're going to keep the floor spread. We're going to take a lot of threes. It's going to be open, modern offense. Maybe we'll post up some mismatches a little bit more with Grant Nelson. He's comfortable in there. But we're going to have him playing a lot more on the perimeter than what he's done in the past.

The transfer portal thing, I don't mind it. It is what it is. You better adjust and figure it out. I think every year you should plan on probably losing a couple guys. You look at us last year, we had Noah, Dom Welch graduate, a couple guys go to the NBA that maybe weren't expected to go before the season. Clowney and Charles. Then you have a couple guys transferring. All of a sudden you have to flip over 75% of your roster. I think that's becoming fairly commonplace in college basketball now.

Whether you like it or not, it's here to stay. It does give you ways to form a roster the way you want. We were able to go get a kid like Grant Nelson. Needed some tough guards. Got Wague -- I'm sorry, Wrightsell and Estrada, and Charles stays in the draft a little unexpectedly, you're able to replace him with a guy like Wague. I think it gives you a chance to have a really good roster every single year. That's our goal right now.

Q. I know you talked about a guy like Clowney being better than you thought. Talk about Kris Parker. You mentioned Rylan Griffen. What kind of leap can he make?

NATE OATS: Rylan can make a big jump. He was good for us as a freshman. He drew a little bit, got stronger, year in the system, he knows it better. We need him to be better defensively, better decision-making with the ball. He definitely got those capabilities and can be good for us.

Kris Parker, it's always hard for guys coming out of high

school. They got to adjust to the speed of the game. So we're working with him on his shooting. If he could shoot it, he's got a chance to be really good. He's long, he's athletic. He plays hard.

We're trying to sell him on kind of that Herb Jones defensive role. He's definitely not to Herb Jones' level on defense, but he has some physical tools to get there. He could be a versatile defender. We just got to keep coaching him, teaching him our system on defense. Individually he can be great within the team system on defense.

But he's got a chance to help us, for sure.

Q. Last year you obviously kind of had Brandon Miller doing what he did. Do you feel like it will be more of a committee thing, five minutes to the game, can that be good for your team?

NATE OATS: I don't know if we've got anybody that's going to go number two in the draft this year. It probably will be more by committee. We've got really good options. Aaron Estrada has proved himself at the college level, at a high level. He's going to definitely have the ball in his hand as lot.

Grant Nelson is a big-time player that should be playing in the NBA after this year. You can go to him. Mark Sears is our second leading scorer last year on the No. 1 team in the country. Between those three guys you got great options.

Then you have some other guys, guys that have played big in big games. Rylan is never scared of the moment. I think Wrightsell has showed up big in big games. I think you got some other guys that can make some tough, smart, heady plays.

I don't think it's where we're going to have one guy that everybody knows is going to get it. It's going to be shared a little bit more. Game to game, see who is playing well, what the matchups are that particular game. Yeah, I would think we would have a little bit more by committee this year.

Q. You mentioned Aaron Estrada, who you have with you today. How has he assimilated into the program?

NATE OATS: He's assimilated great. He's an unbelievable kid. Like, great leader. Plays hard. One of the hardest-working guys I've ever been around.

Then his skill level is really high. We chart everything in practices. At the rim finishing percentage is as high as any



guard I've ever had. He can finish. Got the whole finishing package. He shoots it well from three. And he can be a great defender.

He's not missing much. Really, to be honest with you, I think one of the best things he does for our team is he brings it every day. Like, he's not up, down. Every single day you know what you're getting from Aaron. He's a hard-playing guy. He's going to have some days where he shoots it a lot better than others. Last week he went 10 of 15 from 3-1 day. He's not going to do that every day in live play, but he is going to play hard and bring everything he's got every day.

I think that makes us a lot better as a team. When you don't have to beg your point guard to bring effort every day, between him and Sears, I think those guards, Wrightsell, too, all three of those guys in the backcourt are everyday guys that just bring it every day, that sets the tone for your team. I think it allows you to have tough, gritty defensive-minded, blue-collar type of guys and a type of team like we want to have.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

NATE OATS: Thanks.

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