

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Arkansas Razorbacks

Eric Musselman

Men's Media Day Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are ready to begin with Arkansas. We'll start with questions for Coach Musselman.

Q. You've been kind of a pioneer in the transfer portal. With so many mid-major stars coming to the high major level, what are some of the traits you look for where they'll make that jump and contribute in the way you need?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I mean, I think the one thing with the transfers is there's a body of work against other Division I players. There's a statistical analysis, so to speak, that goes into it. There's the eye test that goes into it. Certainly there's communication with getting feedback from people that have played against that particular player or maybe the program that they're leaving.

I think there's a lot that goes into it. But obviously any transfer has more experience than an incoming freshman. That can change the maturity level, the ability to pick up schemes both offensively, defensively.

So I guess that's kind of an all-encompassing of a transfer recruiting in a minute (smiling).

Q. You've obviously had a lot of experience with the transfers. Had you a lot of really good high school freshmen recruits last season. What's the difference? Is one way better than the other? Is one way easier than the other?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I don't think so. I think every team is different. You know what I mean? The nucleus of the team.

Last year six freshmen, that's a little much for me, for sure. But to have three players be one-and-dones, three draft picks, that does a great deal of positive stuff in the recruiting world, for sure.

You always want your players to reach their dreams as quick as possible. To have three guys basically be with us for eight months is really cool to see.

But certainly from a continuity standpoint, I don't know if there's much continuity in college basketball, let alone college football, with a player that is transferring or being a one-and-done.

I don't think there's a right way or a wrong way. I thought our freshmen last year developed. We go from 10th in the SEC to growing with each game, and then it's a team that upsets Kansas and plays in a Sweet 16. It was because that group got better.

I think that there is a lot of upside for freshmen to grow over the course of a 30-game college season. It's cool for a coaching staff to be a part of a player's growth and be with guys that still haven't reached their max or their upside.

Q. It's your fifth year in the league. It's been good for a long time. Some years tend to be a little top-heavy. Recent years seems like there's a lot of balance. What is your take on the league going into your fifth year? Adding Oklahoma and Texas, too.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Yeah, I think that this league, I think everybody, like, knows about the SEC football-wise. Baseball and basketball, in my eyes, is underrated, even though people talk about it being one of the top two conferences from a basketball perspective.

If you look at the coaches in the league, if you look at the talent level, if you look at the number of draft picks, I mean, I truly believe this is the premier basketball conference right now.

Looking at the league, compared to the small portion size that I have of four years, I think the league is as good, probably better, than any year since I've been in it.

The coaching continues to get better and better each year. Certainly when you look 12 months from now, adding



Oklahoma and Texas, the league is going to be even stronger.

Really competitive league. It's hard. It's a challenge every night (smiling).

Q. We saw him really starting to establish himself before he got injured last year. But talk about how much better Trevon Brazile can be.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Yeah, first of all, he's done an incredible job with his rehab, as has our team doctors and our trainer. He's been a little bit ahead of schedule with everything. We've been really, really patient with him, and we'll continue to be patient with Trevon even on Friday when we have our first exhibition game. He'll be ready for the first game as long as everything continues to progress as it has.

In my opinion, when he got hurt, he thought he was one of the best players in the league. If you're one of the best players in the SEC, you're probably one of the best players in the country.

Real tribute to our team because we spent the majority of this summer building around him and his versatility. To have him go down when he did, then be able to kind of recalibrate who we were from an identity standpoint, I thought it was a real tribute to the other guys because we had people step up. When he went down, we didn't make excuses internally.

But he's headed to have a great year, for sure. Has an incredibly bright future beyond college, as well.

Q. Obviously Chris Beard was here this morning, briefly shared y'all's history of facing each other.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: We didn't get a very good whistle at Tech (laughter).

Q. Knowing him, what do you feel like he brings to the conference? What is the common denominator among the teams that he's coached?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Well, Coach Beard is one of the best coaches in college basketball. Everywhere he goes, he wins. His teams play with great toughness. You better be able to get loose balls against his teams, and you have to figure out a way to score.

Great, great defensive coach. Every team that we faced, I mean, I don't know how many times, maybe three times now in NCAA tournament, a game at Tech, in Lubbock, when I was at Nevada, then an exhibition game last year,

schematically he's really hard to prepare for.

He's a guy that gets his guys to play with maximum effort.

Q. I wanted to ask you about RJ Melendez who is at Georgia now. What do you remember about his game, what you saw against him in that NCAA tournament game?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: He's just got great versatility. I think he'll fit Mike's system really well. He can play three positions. Good defender. Can score in transition. Got good length.

I think he's a player, too, that based on his age and stuff is set to really jump up and become a much more developed player than he has been.

He started on a team that was really good last year. I mean, Illinois, really talented team. He was playing around some guys that were high-volume scorers. I think he's going to probably have more of an opportunity with the ball in his hands to increase his scoring productivity from where it was last year with the Illini.

Q. You mentioned several times how Jalen Graham's practice habits have improved over last year. Due to that, what parts of his game have been unlocked, areas he's improved?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I think anyone that watched us play last year, Curtis understands that Jalen is a really, really talented offensive player. If you watched him at Arizona State. Coach Hurley used him as a go-to player. Second team All-Pac-12. We want him to continue to evolve as a rebounder in traffic and to rebound outside of his area. Those are two areas that we look for growth from him, to be a little more aggressive in getting loose balls.

I think the scoring, he's as hard to cover one on one as anybody in our league, both in the post, in midrange and facing up off the bounce. He's got a great spin game when he puts it on the deck. It's those areas that I talked about that will really determine where his role evolves moving forward.

Q. There have been a lot of questions today to the coaches about roster building in current college basketball. Everyone knows that the most successful teams in the past six, seven years have been very experienced teams. Kentucky has eight freshmen. Many will be counted on heavily. Do you think that can be successful in today's college basketball? I understand they're talented freshmen. Do you think that can be successful?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I do. I really do. I think it depends on who those freshmen are. Again, I can just use our team last year. I mean, we started three freshmen. One of 'em was hurt for a good portion of the season. If he's not injured, we probably have more wins than we did last year. If Brazile is playing with those three freshmen, maybe we have five to six more wins, to be honest with you, when you consider Nick Smith's talent.

Yes, I mean, I think you can win. If we wouldn't have played UConn and we would play some of the other teams left in the term, we felt like coming off that Kansas win, even with the three freshmen starting, that we could have gone beyond a Sweet 16.

Coach Calipari, there's no one better at coaching younger players. There's no one better in the country, probably no one better in the history of college basketball, coaching young guys. I don't think there's even a close second.

So, yes, I do think they can have great success even though they are young 'cause he's got lottery picks. When you have lottery picks, first-round picks, you're going to win games.

Q. Obviously every team is different, every tournament is different. Is there a thread that runs through the NCAA tournament success that you guys have had the last three years?

ERIC MUSSELMAN: I don't know. I mean, I think, number one, you've got to get better as the season progresses. Your team has to be confident, which we have lost in the SEC tournament, how quickly can you rebound mentally, how can you build your confidence up internally even though you might get eliminated. We haven't played in an SEC championship conference, so we've obviously been eliminated but figured out a way to have success.

I think there's an element of relaxation, there's an element of fun that has to happen. I mean, when we go to Buffalo, we go to Niagara Falls, get out of our hotel. Our players talk to other players, know that a lot of teams are stuck in their hotel room, go eat, go to the gym, then got to go play a game.

Whether we're in San Francisco and we're going to the Giants stadium to walk around their field, talk about the history of Major League Baseball. We try to do some things to alleviate some of the pressure, then we talk about the pressure that it's going to be, how many eyes are on you, the amount of TV, the exposure.

We do that now. I mean, we're talking about it as early as

we possibly can so that when you get to March, you're not having those conversations.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

ERIC MUSSELMAN: Thanks.

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