

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

Wednesday, October 18, 2023

Birmingham, Alabama, USA

## Missouri Tigers

## Dennis Gates

### Men's Media Day Press Conference



their hands in the development of our kids, strength and conditioning coach, our trainer, our academic adviser and our entire community.

**Q. Kaleb Brown has really improved. How has he improved and in what ways?**

DENNIS GATES: Thanks for the question.

What I saw is this in Kaleb Brown. Kaleb Brown put his name in the portal, was ready to transfer, based off the lack of production, lack of playing time. But he had a reflection. He sat there, looked in the mirror, with open arms our staff, our program received him back.

It's easy to transfer in today's climate. It's more popular to be a transfer than it is to be a guy that goes through a process. Watching Kobe Brown, the older brother of Kaleb, go through the process of his career, I think had an impact on that, as well.

But when he had a nurturing coaching staff, nurturing moment, people that's going to tell him the truth, his teammates, all others, you see a kid that went through a process. But now on the other side of it, you see more maturity on and off the court. You see someone with great time management skills, someone that cares, that is a year older in a system and program.

Last thing I would say is Kaleb Brown's senior year was the COVID year in high school, his freshman year was post-COVID year, which is two transitions that caused difficulty in getting your feet underneath you in a moment where you're in a new environment.

Obviously he went through a coaching change. Those three events happened, and now this is the most consistent his college career has been with the same coach in myself.

I'm excited about what he's done, what he's able to do. From a basketball standpoint, I've seen him make more shots from behind the arc, but having a positive assist-to-turnover ratio in practice and rebounding. I think it's all slowing down for him, and he's doing a great job.

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Missouri. We will have an opening comment, then take questions.

DENNIS GATES: Well, as the Whitten family head men's basketball coach, I'm excited to begin year two at our tremendous institution led by our athletic director, Desiree Reed-Francois; our president, Mun Choi; and our board of curators.

I'm excited about where our staff is. The development and growth of those individuals allows our team to grow in a certain direction. Obviously we have newcomers, but I'm excited about our returning guys, specifically Kaleb Brown, Aidan Shaw and their growth and production this summer.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. You've been a guy who since getting to Missouri has brought in quite a few transfers from the mid-major level and seen success. What are some of the keys for success for those guys to have success?**

DENNIS GATES: I appreciate that question.

I look at it from this perspective. When you have the right environment and the right coach, the right style of play, it can turn any major or any level of kid into the right level of player.

It's a team sport, not an individual sport. We try to identify guys that build our core values of friendship, love, accountability, trust, discipline, unselfishness, enthusiasm and toughness. I believe the right kid in our program, no matter what level they've transferred from, has made an impact with the city, impact to our institution as a student-athlete and also in between the lines as a basketball player.

I'm just thankful for those adults in our program that have



**Q. Building on the Kobe Brown conversation, he was the Scholar Athlete of the Year, had a tremendous senior year and career for you. You guys are recruiting now very well. How did his development and being a first round pick help grow your program?**

DENNIS GATES: Well, what you have to understand is this. With the NBA undergrad committee, we received his information back and it listed him as not draftable as soon as I got hired. I was lucky enough to get him back, share with him the vision, but also share with him how we would develop him.

I truly believe the development, he's a true one-and-done in our system, if you think about it. He's a kid that after six months of work, he turned himself into a pro with the style of play, with the different risk, development of getting better.

I just think our staff did a great job, not only him, but D'Moi Hodge. This time last year neither one of those kids were on any NBA radars. They're now starting this season as NBA players.

It's a true testament to our environment and how nurturing it has been, but also those guys, their families, where they come from. I just thank the parents for believing in me.

**Q. I wanted to ask you about a couple Arkansas guys. Connor Vanover, you got him back in the SEC. What was it about Connor that made you want to add him to your roster?**

DENNIS GATES: First, when I was at Florida State, I had an opportunity to see Connor grow as a young student-athlete in high school. He's always been on my radar. Then it began to get a little bit more special and close because he went to my alma mater. He signed at Cal Berkeley. That's where I graduated from.

I watched his career through the years. When we made the transition here, we did try to get him, but he opted for Oral Roberts. I truly believe that stop helped him in a tremendous way. He led them to an NCAA tournament, a conference championship, and full circle here we are.

He's a tremendous young man, and I'm excited for him to be a part of our institution and our team.

**Q. Besides height, what does he add to the program? And then Dickey Nutt, wondering what Dickey adds to the program?**

DENNIS GATES: Well, as a basketball player, you look at

the experience Connor Vanover was in the 90th percentile in two-point field goal percentage. He shot close to 40% from the three-point line. He's a guy that causes matchup problems because you look at him in height, I look at him just as a basketball player. He's the tallest guard in the country. That's my philosophy.

Now, at the end of the day I'm going to ask him to not only block shots and score, I'm going to ask him to continue to make unbelievable assists, be a defensive presence, be able to do multiple things, be an anchor, be a leader. He's done a tremendous job from day one. I'm excited, again, about what he's bringing to our program each and every day.

Coach Nutt, me and Coach Nutt share the same mentor. Leonard Hamilton hired Coach Nutt along with Bill Self and Tim Carter on his first staff at Oklahoma State. Once Dickey Nutt got fired from his 20-year head coaching career, the first call he received from Leonard Hamilton's call asking him to come back. He came back in the role as a video coordinator at Florida State. I'm lucky to have him. When I got the head job at Cleveland State, I would not take the job if Dickey Nutt was not going to come with me.

I say that because he's seen it all from top to bottom. He knows what it takes. He comes from a coaching family. He's an unbelievable mentor, unbelievable friend, unbelievable teacher. He's a tremendous human being.

Our staff gets better because he's on it. Our players get better because he's on it. I just hope at some point the ADs, the administrators, the search firms understand that Dickey Nutt should be a head coach again and he could make an impact at any institution if he gets the opportunity.

**Q. I was wondering, what are some of the differences you've seen between this year's team and last year's team?**

DENNIS GATES: Well, we have more players. I think we have more depth than we did last year. We have a tremendous experience, in-game experience, something that I look at, overall experience, life experience is something that I look at.

That team last season was able to be galvanized through a different scheduling philosophy. The scheduling philosophy this season is going to cause this team to grow up faster, and it's going to be a lot of ebbs and flows, meaning some ups and downs, we have to go through.

Hopefully it will curify who we are and calcify who we are as a team and help our identity so that we can have a successful SEC year, but also a post-season.



This conference is a tough conference. Great coaches top to bottom. It's probably at its most competitive that it's ever been. You look at where we are, I truly believe nine to ten teams deserve to be in the NCAA tournament and will have a strong case to be there, no different than last season.

As it relates to all of those things, I just look forward to where we are, where we're going, but also the development that this year identity will become in our team, in our program. The leadership is great. Our captains are great. Sean East and Nick Honor are probably the most experienced combo of point guards that any roster has in the country.

But also you won't see two dynamic guards like that in my eyes throughout the rosters of the nation. So I'm excited about where they are, but also their experiences.

**Q. Obviously last year Kobe was a big part of your team. He has his first reps now at the NBA. Kaleb, he's had a lot of growth. What have you seen out of Kaleb Brown this year and the Brown family and their love for basketball?**

DENNIS GATES: I think it starts with their dad, they are sons of coaches, but also mom. I think Cheryl Brown does a tremendous job of supporting her sons, but also pushing them in the way that they need to be pushed.

They expect those guys -- and we look at basketball, Kobe Brown is 4.0 student, Kaleb Brown has done a tremendous job in the classroom. That character begins well before basketball is picked up. I just thank our parents, the parents of our programs, the parents who believe in our staff, our institution, for a place for their young men to grow and also grow in academics and athletics, and allow me to coach them, allow me to be in their life.

I truly believe that relationship is a special relationship. It starts with the family. It starts with the trust that they have in me as the head coach.

Again, I've seen a great basketball player, but also a great person continue to evolve. Maturation. Maturation, I saw a kid get through a COVID senior year, a COVID return year, a coaching change. I've seen that take place. Maturation is what stands out the most. I see that in detail in his basketball game when it comes down to defensively he's able to grade out in our defensive system higher than any other kid in the program.

Being the son of a coach, he knows the right places, the right reads. He's one of our best post feeders, one of our best connectors. I just need him to continue to grow in

vocal, meaning you have to play the game connected with your teammates vocally. He's done a tremendous job growing in that way.

**Q. Why did you bring four players today? Turnover margin was obviously huge last year. Is it something you talk about a lot or you let the numbers speak for themselves?**

DENNIS GATES: Well, analytically when you look at the stats, turnover margin, I think those things are important in a game, but also ways you can get more possessions.

Everything's not in the possession of offensive rebounds. You can get extra possessions by creating turnovers, by being active. D'Moi Hodge, who was not on a defensive team, he led the conference in steals. I don't know why he wasn't on the steal. He was on our team, that's the most important team he should have been on, and I'm glad he impacted it the way he did with 91 steals on the year.

Having that type of mentality. Having Nick Honor, who can get 50-plus steals; Sean East, 50-plus steals; but also our new guys, from Caleb Grill, Tamar Bates, to even Kaleb Brown, to John Tonje, we have multiple guys who can create defense, defensive possessions, in an analytical way that will give us more possessions offensively.

We try to play the game with a positive assist-to-turnover ratio, which is important. Connor Vanover will probably put more blocks in a category defensively. I like the live ball blocks, not the blocks that go to the out of bounds, but those that we can create offense with.

Those things are important, but as it relates to bringing four guys, I would just rather them have experience. This day is not about me. It's not about the coaches. It's about the student-athletes. I wish I could bring my entire team, I really do, because this experience that you guys being here to do your job, you got to be absent from your home.

Ultimately this is what it's about, them having an experience they will always remember. They may not remember every single game, but they'll remember being at SEC Media Day. That's what it's about, building memories with these young people, but also giving them confidence, giving them courage, and letting them know how important they are to me.

**Q. When you look at the momentum of the program, the success from last year, the recruiting, is this how you envisioned it being heading into your second year?**

DENNIS GATES: Well, I envision a partnership with an



institution. I don't take pats on the back or accolades in a single way thinking it's just about me.

DENNIS GATES: Thank you. M-I-Z.

Last year wouldn't have been possible without our crowd, without the sacrifices of those people showing up and protecting the brand of basketball, the tradition that Mizzou basketball is known for.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

I wouldn't be here as the Whitten family head men's basketball coach if our athletic director didn't believe so. I wouldn't be here in this phase if there hadn't been success before me, starting with Norm Stewart, Quin Snyder, Mike Anderson, Kim Anderson, Frank Haith, Cuonzo Martin. All those coaches have had a range of success.

We're all stewards. Right now I'm currently the steward of the program. I have to make sure that it gets to a certain place.

We've never been to a Final Four. Is this year's team a Final Four team? I don't know, but I guarantee you at some point we're going to act as if that's our destination. We're going to try to make sure everything that we do is for that reason.

It's not for the stats, not for anything else, but to give us the best possible way to leave a legacy, a legacy that our fans believe in, a legacy that I truly believe can happen.

I'm excited about where we are. So when it comes down to the success, I share it with everybody. I share it with our entire stakeholders, meaning those that have come before me, our former players. They put their arms around our players, our program. They've been more connected than they have been in a long time.

If we keep the momentum going in that direction, the sky's the limit. I just don't know when that will happen. Our schedule is hard. It's difficult this season. There's going to be ups and downs. I just ask for the consistency that we had last year from our players and from those that touched our program to be there for us during the ups and downs.

Last year we played Kansas. It was not a good outing. But the consistency allowed us to grow. The consistency of having Mizzou Arena a certain way, a certain sound, allowed us to see what it meant to everyone.

I truly believe that helped us. I'm looking forward to the same obstacle, whether they be for the positive or negative. But we have to get through them. We have to teach these young people how to step forward through adversity.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you.

