

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

Thursday, October 19, 2023
Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Tennessee Volunteers

Kellie Harper

Women's Media Day Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're ready to begin with Tennessee. We'll go straight to questions.

Q. You talked a lot about finding identity last season. From the couple weeks you have with this team, what does that identity look like now and how do you see it growing?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, we've been really pleased with how our team has practiced, our focus, our togetherness. I think we have great team chemistry. I do think that's part of our identity.

I think as we continue to grow, our depth and versatility will be part of our identity. There are definitely areas that we are continuously working on. But I'm just proud of our team for wanting that, for wanting to be better.

They're pretty goal-oriented. This is a great team to coach. I really do love this group.

Q. I know last time you talked about Tamari, you weren't really at a place where you could give a timeline on what her return looks like. Are you feeling comfortable putting a timeline on her return or any updates on her?

KELLIE HARPER: We definitely do not have a timeline on her because I think when you hear people talk about day-to-day, that's very accurate with her.

We have -- typically we go into a week with a weekly plan, at least a three- to four-day plan, and then make adjustments where necessary.

We did get her in a few limited minutes yesterday, scrimmaging with our practice guys. That was good to see. Her presence, it's amazing how quickly her presence can be felt as soon as she steps out on the court.

I think for us, we've got to continue to be patient and be very smart about this progression and make sure that we're putting her in position to be successful.

I think she understands that. There's a lot of conversations daily to make sure that happens.

Q. You have a great transfer class. Can you break down each one, what they add, but the story of recruiting them.

KELLIE HARPER: For sure.

We're super excited about our transfers. We have four transfers who have fit seamlessly into our team.

We have a veteran team. Part of that feel, that vibe, is the transfers and how quickly they have adapted and really adjusted and fit in with our returners.

Destinee Wells is a Tennessean. She's coming from Belmont. Had an unbelievably successful career there as a point guard. She can really set up her teammates. She can score. I think she is getting more comfortable with our group every single day. She's just really talented.

I think the background story for her, two years ago we played Belmont in the NCAA tournament. Sara Puckett has to hit a big three-pointer towards the end of the game for us to pull out the win. Part of that was because we could not guard Destinee Wells. So we're glad she's on our side.

Avery Strickland is also a Tennessean, played at Pitt for a year. Had a good freshman season where she shot the ball well, she's aggressive. She has a high motor. I think she brings a lot of intangibles as well. But as she continues to grow and get more comfortable, I think she's going to really help us this year, but also I think she's got a chance to have a terrific career at Tennessee.

Then Jewel Spear is coming from Wake Forest where she led the ACC in scoring. We felt like we needed another punch on the perimeter. She can really put the ball in the



hole. She can shoot the three, shoot the jumper, use ball screen. We're excited about how she's joined our team and continues to see that production.

Our last transfer is actually from South Carolina, Talaysia Cooper. She will not be playing this year. Her role is a little bit different. Already she's made an impact on our team. When we have her on our team, also when we put her with our scout team, she's been hard to guard. She's been a menace on the defensive end.

When it is time for her to be able to play, we're really looking forward to that.

Q. A little more about Sara Puckett. You recruited her in high school. What is she doing to continue to progress?

KELLIE HARPER: Sara Puckett has had a great summer and fall. I mean, she looks amazing. She is playing with great confidence right now. She is scoring in a variety of ways. I think her defense has improved.

She's probably our best rebounder right now on the team. I could not be happier about where she's at.

Q. Another tough non-conference schedule for you guys this year. What did you learn from last year's non-conference?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, obviously I think it's pretty well-known that last year our schedule was a beast. We took some lumps early on. What we learned about our team is they don't quit. They kept fighting and trying.

At the end of the year, we were clicking pretty good when the NCAA tournament started. I think a lot of that had to do with the growth that we had, the challenges, the adversity that we had early on, how we came together to push through.

Obviously we have a tough schedule again. Hopefully it's not as many lumps. That's not what you plan on. But regardless, these games are on your schedule to help you be the best you possibly can be. We will be challenged. We will be tested.

I think our players enjoy that competition. They want to play the best. We're excited about all the challenges on our schedule.

Q. You brought in some talented guards. How do you see that raise the competition level?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, actually I was talking to Rickea

and Tess on the way down here. We started going through the roster. Every player on our team is better from last year, every single one of them. That's a huge statement. It's a huge testament to who they are individually and how much work they put in, how our coaches were really able to get in the gym, utilize the time we had with them this summer and fall.

I think our newcomers, again, it's been a really good blend. I think everybody's being competitive, but I think in a healthy way. I think they're pulling for one another, challenging one another.

They all understand that we lost a lot in that area, so everyone has to raise their game and be better.

Q. You talked about your concerns about rebounding. How are you going to get those rebounds you lost?

KELLIE HARPER: Two guards probably averaged around 15, total of 15. That is a big blow from two players that played a lot from the perimeter position. Right now we're not seeing that in practice. It's a huge concern of mine.

Rebounding is always a priority for us. We're not seeing it at the level that we're accustomed to.

I think we've got to get better as a team, as a whole. We don't have someone that's going to come in and give us 10 or 15. It's just not going to happen. I think everybody has to pick up their game a little bit. It's probably going to be a group effort to make up for some of those.

I think we have to be maybe a little bit more disciplined. If you don't have the size and natural ability to rebound, your discipline has to be up, you've got to get it that way.

It is a constant thought when we're in practice on how we can help our team.

Now, also I'm grading our team versus our practice guys. We have an unbelievable group, scout team, right now. It will be interesting to see as we start competing in November where those numbers are and where we need to go.

Q. How have you seen practices change over your five years in terms of the talent you're able to bring in, scout team successes? How is it different this year than maybe two or three years ago?

KELLIE HARPER: I think every year as a coach you evaluate your team, you evaluate your strengths and weaknesses. Not just your team, but you individually. Where do I need to be better? Where do I need to help

grow our team?

A lot of that is reflected in practice. For us, we're always trying new things. We're always trying to figure out what's going to work for each team.

I will say this year there's more technology, scientific-based reports that we get that I can't decipher, but I'll learn. We're trying to figure out how to help them be their best.

We have so many resources at the University of Tennessee. We're trying to utilize all of our resources. But also you have the eye test as you're watching your team. We have a great scout team, like I said. We're trying to find the balance of competing with our scout team versus each other.

Our practice management has probably looked a little different this year, but I think it's been a very positive change.

Q. I know y'all wanted to be at the Final Four, play for a national championship. What was it like to actually see how successful SEC teams were, 10 million people watching?

KELLIE HARPER: I yelled at the TV a few times, in a positive way (smiling). I'm like, Yes SEC, right? To have the showing that we had in the Sweet 16, to be pulling for each other. Just super excited about where we were.

The SEC is really good. We were really good last year. I think we're better this year. I really do. I think the women's teams, the coaches, the players, there are so many dynamic people in our league.

We know it's going to be competitive. We'll be pulling for each other all the way until we get to those games in January.

Q. Could you walk us through how coming to Huntsville came to be? Playing a neutral game...

KELLIE HARPER: Playing Middle Tennessee in Huntsville was something we've -- playing Middle Tennessee is something we've been working on. Obviously the contract opened up and this was an opportunity for us to play in Huntsville. I think it's the site of their tournament. It was a great opportunity for them.

We felt like it was a good opportunity for us to get down in this area where some of our players are, reach a different fan base, so to speak.

I'm excited about the opportunity. One of the things that I

like to tell our team, when we go on the road, sometimes this is the only time people have to see you in person. You have an opportunity to make an impression on a region, on a group, on a city. Obviously we're excited about coming to Huntsville.

We know how talented they will be, how well-coached they are. It will be a really good game.

Q. Rickea going into her last season, feels like her whole career has led up to this last moment. How do you feel like her growth, from a mentality standpoint, from an intangibles standpoint, has kind of prepared her to be ready for that moment, take what she wants this season?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, from the moment Rickea stepped on our campus, I think we've seen a lot of growth in her both as a young woman, as a future pro, as a basketball player. I think we've seen a lot of growth there.

I think part of that is handling success, handling pressure. I think the USA Basketball opportunity she had this summer was great for her. Honestly, great for her confidence.

She's a very confident young woman, but I think that really elevated her confidence to be able to go and play against some of the top players in the world, really be productive and successful.

I love her growth with our team. They love her. She loves them. I think it's very apparent. They know how competitive she is. I know how much they're going to lean on that.

I think her experience last year in the NCAA tournament was invaluable. It was her first NCAA tournament in her career, so I think having that under her belt was really good.

There's a lot of lights, there's a lot of press, there's a lot of talk. It's a big-time deal. I think having that under her belt (momentary loss of audio.)

Q. Since taking the job, your squad has basically had Alabama's number. You look at the job that Kristy Curry has done in building up the program, what can you say about the evolution of that program and what they need to do to get on the next level?

KELLIE HARPER: Coach Curry is a terrific coach. I mean, they're one of the hardest teams to play and prepare for because I think they do a great job game planning. I think they do a great job playing to their strengths, trying to take

yours away.

Although we have that record, if you go back and look, several of those games have been very close. It's always a battle.

I commend them. I think that's an excellent staff. They put together some really good pieces. I think they're recruiting some high-level players. As they continue to get those players in, they're going to continue to do what they're doing.

I think they've done a great job, I really do. I think their trip in the NIT a couple years ago gave them a lot of confidence and experience. I think that carried over this past year.

Q. Can you speak to Jillian Hollingshead. What do you want from her this season? Where does she fit into this new team?

KELLIE HARPER: I think Jillian, I want for her to be a go-to player for us because I think she has the ability to do that. She's definitely versatile. We play her inside and out. Because Tamari has not been a full go, Jillian has played more on the block than she did this time last year. I think that's been good for her and her development.

I think Jillian is talented. As she continues to grow and find consistency, not just in games but in practices each and every day, that's where I think we're going to see her become that go-to player that I know she can be.

Q. You mentioned a very veteran team. Having so many veterans, things get picked up quicker. Do you have any examples of how having so many veterans has aided the progression of this team this summer?

KELLIE HARPER: Yeah, I don't know if I have on the top of my head any specific examples.

I'll show them a play, even if it's new for our returners, they're picking things up very quickly. There's not a lot of confusion out there on the court. I don't know if they just all feel comfortable, if our overall IQ is helping one another.

They're really, really an intelligent group when it comes to the court. I think their understanding of basketball is pretty high as a group.

There's just a comfort when you're a veteran and you know what I want, you know the overall philosophy, you understand, you have a historical reference. I think we feel that with this group.

Like I said, they've made it easy and fun to coach them.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

KELLIE HARPER: Thank you.

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