

# Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

**Texas A&M Aggies**

**Joni Taylor**

Women's Media Day Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We are ready to begin with Texas A&M. We'll have an opening statement, then take your questions.

JONI TAYLOR: We're obviously excited to approach a new basketball season coming off of a year where we were taking over a new program, our goal was to become, to become better players, teammates, passers, shooters. Just excited about the strides we took last year in the off-season.

Our returners have really done a great job of embracing what the standard is going to be for Aggie women's basketball. We were able to obviously add some talent to our roster with high school players and transfers.

Just really looking forward to what's going to be another tough year in our conference obviously, and excited about moving the needle in the right direction and getting Aggie women's basketball back in the national spotlight.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. Aside from staying healthy, what were the areas when you evaluate a team, you say this is where we need to make the progress? Can you talk about the things you did to address those issues.**

JONI TAYLOR: Well, a lot of it was just playing. We had a roster that just was inexperienced. We graduated a ton of seniors the year before we got there. You don't know what you don't know.

Even though the roster said junior, senior, sophomore, in terms of playing experience, they were all freshmen. They had never been on the floor, been in those moments. As much as you teach and coach, we did all those things, and film, you learn it by playing it, living through it, having a season of figuring it out on the court.

That was probably our best teacher, them being in the fire themselves, knowing what it's like to have to carry the weight every Thursday, Sunday and Monday of competing.

**Q. You mentioned your motto from last year is we are becoming. What do you think this program can be with this upcoming season?**

JONI TAYLOR: All right, so last year our motto was becoming, this year it's tough. I think we have a level of toughness that is much better than last year, but it's still not exactly where we want to be. Our motto is TOUGH: Trust, Ownership, Unity, Gratefulness, and Humility.

I think we became last year resilient. We learned how to win some games in the second tournament. We put together a string of three games. I think we're coming into this year with a new confidence, with a new sense of understanding about what it takes day in and day out. Consistency and toughness are the things we're really looking to have in everything we do day in and day out to move the needle.

**Q. What did you learn about your USA experience?**

JONI TAYLOR: Any time you have a chance to represent your country, it's something that you approach with great humility and honor. It's a privilege.

As always, I learned that nothing happens by accident. There's no place for your habits to hide when you're on that stage. So the 12 young ladies that we had on our roster, the way they approached their business every single day in order to bring back a gold medal for this country was something that was just remarkable to watch and see.

When you think about the fact we had seven days of practice before we got on the plane and went to Madrid, Spain, to compete for a gold medal, when other countries are with each other year-round, year after year after year, it takes tremendous trust, sacrifice, it takes a level of coming together and willingness to take your personal ego and put it to the side for the umbrella and ego of USA Basketball.

Those young ladies carried that weight very, very well. But your habits have no place to hide. We were fortunate to have a group of young women who understood that. Obviously USA Basketball and how they carry themselves, prepare, you're just around the best of the best.

**Q. You have a really impressive transfer class this year. How do you convince people to come to College Station despite the record? Individually, how do you get them to come on?**

JONI TAYLOR: Thanks for asking that.

I think in terms of convincing, who we are as a staff speaks to itself. I think we have enough longevity in this game, in the SEC, playing on a national stage. Obviously when we were at the University of Georgia, now here at Texas A&M, those young ladies know who we are, what we're about, know what they're going to get day in and day out when they come to our program.

It's about being a part of something bigger than themselves. They were intentional about wanting to come, for different reasons, but it was to be better human beings, better players, make sure they have a chance to be prepared when they get drafted and play overseas.

It didn't take a lot of convincing. That wouldn't be the word I would use to describe it. It's more like I've seen, I've watched, I've heard, and I want a piece of it.

**Q. A couple individuals in particular, what are your expectations for Janiah and Endyia this year?**

JONI TAYLOR: Obviously for Janiah, she's someone that is very, very talented. One of the country's best players. I think for her, our conversation is about just the consistency she has in everything that she does. She always shows up in a great way with a great posture to lead, to serve, to be better today than she was yesterday. How do we knock that up even more?

Because she has high goals for herself and for our team, so that comes with great responsibility. We're working with making sure that she understands the responsibility and expectations she has when she steps onto the floor day in, day out.

With Endyia, it is about using her voice and being our leader as a point guard. She obviously shoots the ball well, passes it well. Her stat line is ridiculous if you take a look at what she did at the University of Oregon. It's again preparing her for the draft, preparing her to play professionally, what that takes, looks like.

We spend a lot of time talking about the habits you have to have as a person. Who you are one place is who you are everywhere. She wants to make sure she's ready for that opportunity.

But it's communication. It's knowing our offense. It's putting people in the right positions, obviously knowing how to score for yourself and others.

**Q. Players mentioned earlier that Kyndall Hunter is injured. Can you tell us more that.**

JONI TAYLOR: Kyndall tore her Achilles about three days before she was supposed to show up for summer workouts. Was going to be a really big piece of what we were going to be this year, still might be. To her credit, she has attacked rehab like a beast. She is way ahead of schedule.

With that being said, we're going to rely on our doctors and trainers to tell us where she is. It still remains to be seen if she will play for us this year or not. But she has put herself in a really good position to have an opportunity to see some time this year.

**Q. Last night we saw one of your program's former players take home a WNBA title. Is there any conversation or lesson you learned from seeing former Aggies perform at the professional level?**

JONI TAYLOR: I think the best conversation is when Sydney comes back to campus, which she does on a regular basis, to talk to the team. Look at last night as a perfect example. She doesn't play a ton, but she's still on the roster and a valuable part of the team, world championship team, because of the things we talked about earlier -- her habits, the process, who she is as a person, how she shows up in a room every single time she shows up.

That's why she's still on the roster. Then when her number is called, she's ready to go.

You have Olympian point guard Chelsea Gray who cannot play, two starters don't play last night, and Sydney Colson gets her number called and she's ready to go. She was wonderful defensively. I think her stat line was plus 17. Those are the things that she talks about to our players. And what better way than to watch it and then for it to come out of her mouth when she comes back to campus.

Super excited and proud for her. We texted last night.

**Q. Can you comment on a player we saw earlier in the day, Sarah Ashlee Barker. What did you see in her in**

## **her recruitment and her growth in the conference?**

JONI TAYLOR: Yeah, absolutely. S.A. is someone who I feel is like a daughter. We recruited S.A. at a very young age, saw her play, had her at camp.

The first thing I think about is her toughness. She has a toughness that a lot of players don't have, so it puts her ahead of the eight ball. Her ability to shoot it, three level scorer, versatile, plays the three, the four, high basketball IQ. Stubborn at times, but that stubbornness works to her advantage. Willing to do anything for her team to win. The ultimate teammate in terms of just doing what's best for the team. She's had some injuries that she's battled and she's worked really hard to keep herself healthy.

Super excited about what she's going to do this year for Alabama and how she represents the Crimson Tide.

## **Q. What are your expectations for this team?**

JONI TAYLOR: So we talk about goals, we talk about expectations, but really we talk about the process. If we do these things, then when we look up, we're going to be where we want to be.

Is it the goal or is it the habits daily? Is it being one of the top four teams in the conference in terms of offensive rebounding, defensive rebounding? What are our defensive goals going to look like? What is that PPSA going to be in terms of points per possession?

Those are the things we talk about. We want to have our players to understand at a high level. If we hit those markers, then we're going to look up and be exactly where we think we should be.

## **Q. Speak a little bit to Aicha Coulibaly, who she is as a player. When you heard she was going in the portal, what was your reaction?**

JONI TAYLOR: Obviously she's the one we know well, having played against her when she was at Auburn. High motor. Another three level scorer. Really, really has attacked her game and worked on her game.

A.C. was great coming to Texas A&M for Janiah Barker, to see what it looks like to show up every day with a high motor, be consistent in the things she does, to have someone to go against every single day. They push each other and make each other better.

Same thing with Lauren Ware and Maliyah Johnson. That group of forwards has pushed each other well.

When she went into the portal, she called us, said, Hey, obviously I know you very well, have liked the demeanor, the camaraderie you have with your players, the way you coach them, the way it looks on the sidelines. Can we have a conversation about what that looks like? I want to stay in the SEC, because it does mean more, it is the best conference. My list is very small, but I will be staying in this league. Can we just get to know each other a little better and figure some things out.

That's how the conversation went. She came on a visit. Absolutely confirmed for her what she already thought from the outside looking in, the process was pretty simple after that.

## **Q. With the players that transferred into the SEC, there's obviously a lot of stars in this league. Sometimes Janiah gets maybe not mentioned. Do you think she's underestimated, how big a star she could be in this league?**

JONI TAYLOR: I think it goes back to what you said, there's a ton of stars in this league. I think Janiah is also mature enough, this summer she played with the AmeriCup team, was one of two 19-year-olds. It was her third time representing USA Basketball. I think she's confident in herself and her abilities.

She walks in with the mentality if I do what I'm supposed to do, the rest of it will take care of itself.

I don't think she really focuses on what the paper said, what the media says, who people are talking about. It's something she has done really well from a very early age, drowned out the noise. So I can't say that it's something she thinks about or she's frustrated by.

With that being said, if Janiah does what she's supposed to do, when the season is over, we're going to hear her name. That's what we talk about, like it's not where you start, it's where you finish. Let's focus on the things we need to do that we are finishing as a team, individually, where we want to.

But thanks for asking that question.

## **Q. You're really beloved by your players, known across the country and the conference as being this really important, formidable coach. Don't tell us your secrets, but how do you cultivate the relationships from a young age?**

JONI TAYLOR: I think it starts with knowing who you are. In order to lead others, you have to lead yourself well. Fortunate to have people around me who modeled that

behavior, have spent a ton of time knowing not only who I am, but who I can coach and who we want to coach as a staff. I think that is the first thing, we are intentional about who we bring into our program. Because we have that intentionality, the rest of it is pretty easy.

We start at a really young age evaluating talent. We get to know who they are as people. That relationship starts eighth, ninth grade. It is consistent. So by the time they get on campus, you have four years of a relationship that's built. So the sweat equity in our relationship is long-standing. That allows us to get to the hard things fast.

There's trust in that relationship. There is blind faith in that relationship. You look at Janiah, signed with us at Georgia, came with us to Texas A&M with no hesitation. There's a blind faith that comes with that. Sydney Bowles and Tineya Hylton did the same thing.

I think it's because we are genuine as people. We're very honest. We're very blue-collar in our approach. We're not going to jump out of balloons when you come to visit. We're going to make sure you see what you need to see. It's going to be who you are every day when you show up at our campus.

I think that resonates with people. We want it to resonate with people that are meant to be at Texas A&M. What we do is not for everybody, but it's for the people we have identified that we think can represent us on and off the court in a first-class manner.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Coach.

JONI TAYLOR: Thank you.

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