

# Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

**Arkansas Razorbacks**

**Mike Neighbors**

Women's Media Day Press Conference



MIKE NEIGHBORS: Very brief opening statement. Thank you for covering women's basketball, the SEC, and thank you for being here today.

I will take your questions.

**Q. Where do you see your team this year? Do you feel like you're in a transition? Do you feel like you're contenders?**

MIKE NEIGHBORS: We'll find out. I think we do have depth for the first time. We're in year seven of this transition. I don't know if you can be in transition for seven years or not (smiling).

We do have a little depth. I'm excited to see how that plays out. I know this: When you start to look around the league, we could have our best team ever. In our league, who knows where that puts you. You're going to put a big number beside somebody's name when we're doing these pre-seasons with 14 teams. I don't know where we will end up, but I'm excited about our depth and our ability to maybe do a few new things with some old faces.

**Q. Your team was just millimeters away from making the NCAA tournament last year. How does that play into the motivation for this year?**

MIKE NEIGHBORS: We talked about it an awful lot throughout the summer. We met back in my house where we watched the selection show and did not make it. To start the season, talked about how it felt to be the millimeters that you're talking about, the five games decided by three points or less. We were told any of those five games go the other way, we're an NCAA tournament team again.

Putting it all in perspective, doing an autopsy, good, hard look at ourselves, the things that created those

one-possession games, try to make sure we fix those during the pre-season. I think we've addressed all those things. We've moved past it.

As much of a motivation as it was to start, I think it's behind us. Let's focus on staying on the path of where we're trying to get this year.

**Q. The SEC has been really good for a long time.**

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Yep.

**Q. There's been a lot of star power added through the portal. What is your take; is the league better than ever? What is your take on the league?**

MIKE NEIGHBORS: I was talking to Coach Blair about that yesterday. I think that's somebody that's been around the league enough to be a valuable resource.

I think it's got to be in the conversation for as deep as it's been. I said earlier, you walk into four different gyms in this league, and they've got a national championship banner hanging up. Four different teams. Not the same team with four banners. You have four different teams who have won this thing.

The depth of talent, when we started picking the all-conference, pre-season, I ran out of space. There's still good players that you're not going to be listing as a pre-season all-conference kid. I consider all transfers in there. If you're considering those kids, the depth of talent is as deep as I can remember and Coach Blair can remember.

I think it's a fun place to be. It's a hard place to be. But I do know that our kids understand if you can compete in our league, you can compete nationally when it comes time.

But I think you're right, it is deep.

**Q. With Mak and Sam, you have two of the most experienced guards in the league. How nice is it to have that when you're adding Taliah Scott into the mix?**



MIKE NEIGHBORS: I've challenged both of them to teach her and tell her stories, get her ready for when they're gone. I challenged Mak to do that with Sam. Now I'm challenging both of them to do that for Taliah. She doesn't feel like she has to come in and have the ball in her hands all the time. She can learn on the fly. These two kids have accepted that.

For me, it really helps me get through the rest of my day. I don't have to spend a lot of time worrying about what's been talked about in the locker room. I know they're going to take care of that stuff. I don't have to worry about me being the one telling the stories of how to handle adversity. Mak and Sam are going to take care of that.

It's nice to be able to focus on maybe those things that kept us from winning those one-possession games. If I'm not having to focus on the normal drama that a team unfolds throughout the course of the year, we can focus on X's and O's, execution, rotations, analytics, whatever you want to talk about, knowing that those two guys are there leading the way for us, it certainly makes for an easier day.

**Q. What has analytics done for you as a coach? What is your approach to the NIL?**

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Yeah, so with analytics, I think it's just another tool. I don't use 'em 100% of the time, but I use 'em as information.

I don't want to make a decision with missing information. So if that information is out there, I want to take it, I want to evaluate it, use it for what it's worth. It is a huge part of what we do. I don't try to overburden our kids with it, spend a lot of time talking about the really deep analytics that I'm looking at.

I do still use them. When it comes game time, it's still a game that's got to be played by young women in real time. I don't spend a lot of time with that.

The NIL stuff continues to be an ever-changing, every single day something new. It's fun. I like roller coasters. I'm not the guy that goes to Cedar Point and rides the merry-go-round, the Ferris wheel and the thing that goes in circles. I like the upside downs and the turns.

I like the fact that Coach Mulkey doesn't have any more experience with it than I do. She's had to deal with it the same number of years as I have. Coach Staley has the same number of years. Even though they've coached in more games and bigger games, in that particular area, we all have the same amount of experience.

Talking to our kids, listening to them, listening to what's important, trying to stay up with how it can possibly be changing.

My role is to really support what they're going out and doing with their own name, image and likeness, make sure I have a detailed calendar. I give them a calendar for a full year on day one so they can plan their days. If they've got a photo shoot or they need to get their stuff done, they've got a calendar for a full year in advance.

We try to be as efficient as we can with our time. We don't have very many surprise hours. I want them to be able to go out and take the full advantage of the way the rules are written right now 'cause we all know they're going to change eventually.

Just try to be an advocate for them and let them do everything they can do to maximize their full potential right now. It's obviously a huge part of what we do. I think we have to have a plan. Ours is to make sure they're maximizing it.

**Q. A random question for you. This year Eric has both of his boys in the program. What do you think about that dynamic? What is that like for him having his kids in the building?**

MIKE NEIGHBORS: I mean, I see it. You can see he's really hard on those two guys (smiling). He expects a lot out of them.

I tried to kind of one-up him. I hired my wife. My wife is on my staff. I feel like I've one-upped him a little when it comes that. I'd like to hear what his take is on having my wife in the building, as well.

It's fun to see it. There's a lot of places that talk about family atmosphere, family environment. I think he's obviously got evidence of that. It's cool to see them around. You can see, he always talks about his dad so much. Very few interviews go by without him talking about the influence that his dad had on him. To get to see him turn around and do that back with his two kids, it's fun.

They're very busy around the office. It's fun to see 'em going from place to place.

**Q. What does it mean to see your player Kelsey Plum win a back-to-back championship yesterday?**

MIKE NEIGHBORS: You know, to watch how she's handled it is so much fun. I remember from day one with that kid, her drive. We never were able to win a championship. We didn't win a Pac-12 championship or

national championship. To see her get it is really, really cool.

I text her very randomly. We still have a really good relationship. She has so many people pulling at her. She has become an amazing young woman. Now to see her getting married, to get that invitation, to hear that was happening, just to see all that come full circle, really happy for her.

I thought last night was an unbelievable game. It's one that I'll remember watching with my two sons. We sat there and watched every second of it. I'm looking forward to checking in with her, see how she's taking it all in. But really happy for her, for sure.

**Q. You have Sasha Goforth back this year. Can you talk about what she adds to the team.**

MIKE NEIGHBORS: These are our kids' words. Just the smile she brings in, the refreshing outlook on what she learned during her year away from the game. Obviously on court she brings a two-way player that can play offensively and defensively. They love that aspect.

I think both Mak and Sam and other people I've heard on our campus interviews with our guys that are here, they've all spoken about just her approach, now that she's back and playing. She was around the program last year, she just wasn't able to play. Now that she's back out there, there's this renewed view of what it's like to be a student-athlete, what's important, how to handle the adversity, the tough times.

That's there, but then obviously on court now, like Coach Schaefer and I are getting in arguments about who is Saylor going to guard and who's Sasha going to guard. Two years ago it was Sasha, last year it was Saylor in that match-up. Who are you going to put on who? It's fun to have those conversations rather than not having very many different options with that.

To see them play against each other has made them both better. She's just kind of raised every level of what we do intensity-wise with every day she's back. Still a lot of things to go. We still take it day by day. It's definitely not finished yet. It's going to be an everyday process once games start, once practices and all those things start coming.

I think she's equipped with a lot of really good resources and tools. We're all better for having her around us, that's for sure.

**Q. Saylor had a great season last year, especially**

**towards the end. What do you expect for her? What do you want for her?**

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Just to see where she's at. Be good at the things you're already good at. Don't all of a sudden try to forget that you broke a record, a defensive rebounding record, last year as a freshman. Do that for us still, too.

She wants to make more shots. She is a better shooter than what her percentages showed last year. That I think comes with just having not, quite frankly, played for two and a half years. She didn't play her senior year of high school. She didn't play initially at UConn. Then she had to transfer and sit for us. It was a time thing, get back in the speed and the flow.

She's made 'em in practice. She's in the best shape of her life. That's her words, not mine. I think she's got some confidence about her.

I want to see her continue to be good at the things you were good at already, then make a shot or two more. That's where I think she's at.

**Q. You talked on the depth that the team has this year. What have practices been like now that you have -- not always in the past have you been able to go five-on-five and have equal competition.**

MIKE NEIGHBORS: You've seen something of them. You came and watched enough of them to know that we could split up 10 people, any different combination, and the games were competitive. Whereas in the past, you could have walked in and go, I think red team is going to beat white team because of what you knew. I don't think you could have done that this year. I know I can't.

We try to play everybody the same number of days with each other. You have Mak and Sam as your two guards. Tomorrow you have Taliah and Karley. We tried to make sure those were all even. When you put that practice schedule together, you might in your mind have a guess, and a lot of times you're wrong.

That's a good thing to have if our depth is quality. We'll start to find that out as we start to play our games. It certainly makes practices very, very competitive. The importance of wins -- we chart our wins. The importance of a win is very evident to our kids in every drill that we're doing that has a winner and a loser. They're on us as officials. We are not very good referees, as much as we'd like to think we are.

I learned that from them. They'd like us to be a little bit



better at refereeing than we are, for sure, because it's competitive.

**Q. Looking at the non-conference schedule that the team put together, you didn't choose Florida State. That was the challenge game. Aside from that, that's just another team thrown in the mix of a handful of tough opponents. What do you think about your strategy behind that, giving your athletes the opportunity to play in those big games?**

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Well, if you don't, you're going to have some false sense of confidence when you turn the calendar. If you don't schedule UCLA or you don't schedule a tournament that's got tournament teams in it like Marquette, Illinois, then challenge yourself with those in-state road games that are a little tricky for us. Everybody will look at it and go, You're going to Arkansas -- that's a hard game going to Arkansas State. The last time they lost over there, they made a movie out of it. It's a big deal in the state to go to Jonesboro.

I'm really proud of the SEC and the ACC working together because when the challenge came about, the one thing we all said is it needs to be matched up evenly for us to plan scheduling-wise.

If you look down the list, it's pretty close who the ACC has picked, where you're picked within your league. We knew we were going to get a challenging game. I just kind of predicted we'd have a road game. Just kind of my luck. I'm that bad luck guy; I knew we were going to start on the road. We knew we were going to have a quality opponent.

We went in search of two or three others for sure that were ranked in the top 25 in the pre-season. We got 'em. If not, you roll into that SEC with false security and false confidence. That's the worst kind of confidence to have, is that imposter. Maybe you're not as good as you are.

We are going to know how good we are or aren't by the time the calendar rolls around. I think that's what scheduling is all about, is to do what's best for your current team. Felt like we had some kids that wanted the challenges, so we gave 'em to 'em.

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