

# Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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## Auburn Tigers

## Johnnie Harris

### Women's Media Day Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Auburn. We'll go straight to questions.

**Q. How beneficial is it to have Honesty back for another year?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: It's been amazing to have her back. It's super beneficial. She came back, and she honestly was having her best year before she got hurt for Christmas. I mean, her numbers were amazing. She was shooting the ball really well. She was scoring. She was just doing a lot for us before that accident.

It took her a while to recover from that, so she never got back to herself. I think it's been official both for us and for her.

She still had opportunities to go to the next level, but I think this will help her. Honesty loves Auburn. She wants to see Auburn back in post-season play, which we accomplished last year with the NCAA tournament. She came back to do that.

She's been working her butt off. I feel really good about where we are, where she is, her mindset, all of that.

**Q. Can you talk about the two ladies that you decided to bring today and what are they bringing to your team this year in terms of leadership?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: They bring experience. Actually both of them, they work really hard. They bring it every day. Taylen bring it every day. Taylen is a little bit more vocal. They're both super aggressive. They understand.

They've both been to post-season play. They've both been to the NCAA tournament. Honesty has won a national championship. Taylen is coming off of being all-Big 12 and post-season, playing in the NCAA tournament. So just that



experience, knowing what it takes to get there, and leading this team.

I have a team with eight new players. It's really important to have somebody that's been there, to have that voice. When things get rough, there's somebody that's been there and done that, so they can echo what I'm trying to do.

**Q. You shook up your staff this off-season, including the promotion of Alex Stewart to your chief of staff. How excited are you to see what she can bring in her new role?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: I'm super excited. Alex has been a head coach before. She's now chief of staff. She still does some on the administrative side, but she's coaching. She'll be scouting. She has embraced it. She's watching a lot of film. She's been giving me really good feedback.

I'm just excited for her, but I'm also excited for our team. She has a really good relationship. She has their respect. They have her respect. It was just a win-win situation for us.

**Q. You had six players transfer out. What do you attribute that to? How did you work this off-season to fill those gaps?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: Having choices. I think it was a number of different things. I can't say exactly, exactly what was going through everyone's mind. Some was mutual.

But just bringing in the kids we brought in, I feel like we have players that fit our system, players that understand what we're looking for.

When you take over a program, you have to change the culture. Sometimes that's really hard. Sometimes you fit in that. That doesn't make you a bad person; maybe you just don't fit that culture or don't fit that system.

I think we have players now, I know we have players now that fit our system, fit our culture. It's been uphill. I think our team is a lot better.



**Q. You talk about being the third year, ascending. What would it take now to contend in the league? Is there a factor, a metric, a player architect that you're looking for that would be the catalyst?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: I think we had to address a lot of different things. We had to get some size. We're longer and more athletic. We have some depth at point. We didn't have a really true point guard. I think Mar'Shaun kind of evolved over the year, especially in post-season, but bringing JaMya Mingo-Young in, her toughness. She played point for me as a freshman at Mississippi State. She knew what we wanted. She's another kid that's super competitive. She brings it. She knows what I want.

I think having those players, having players that are tough like she is, like Taylen is, to join the team we had coming back, I think that was a big key for us.

Also getting some size. We were really small inside. We have three players that's 6'3" and above, actually four. Then we have long, athletic guards. I think just addressing those needs will help.

The thing that would take us is them developing. And they are every day. They work really hard. They are a really aggressive team. They play hard. I think they want it. They do the little things that it takes to win.

It's just putting all of that together. I just see this team getting better and better every day.

**Q. You talk about the improvement of the team. You had a couple of practices, then you took a trip overseas. How have you seen this team grow from day one to now?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: The chemistry was a big thing. That was a big thing that I was worried about because a lot of new players, a lot of new players that was going to play, that was going to have to produce.

I think from the first game to the third game over there, you could see a big difference. Then coming back here, just kind of talking to them and getting it out, What do you want? What is it gonna take for us to get there? For them to verbalize that. Now putting it into action. I think they come to work every day, and they're working towards those goals.

I can just see what's in here (indicating heart). They have that heart. They're super aggressive. We have a practice squad of guys. We just got them within the last three weeks. In the first couple of days, they killed us. Now they have to sweat. They're having to work really hard because

our kids are super competitive. They figure it out. They get after you.

I have some depth, so that helps a lot. I just think that's how this team has grown.

**Q. You have a tough non-conference schedule including a trips to Rutgers, rematch with Clemson. How important is it to play a challenging non-conference schedule? How does it prepare you for conference play?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: It will definitely prepare us. That's why we put this schedule together. But I do feel like we have the players that can handle this. Like I said, we have players that have been there.

I talked about some of them. We have a couple of junior college All-Americans in there. Those kids, they've been in the fire. They haven't been in the SEC, but they have played, and they have played against top competition.

I just think with our practices and them going up against Honesty. Our practices are so competitive. Honesty and Mingo and Taylen, Mar'Shaun, Sydney Shaw -- I haven't mentioned Sydney Shaw today, but she's probably the most improved player. She's been in the gym every day. She's competitive. She's hitting all those tough shots. She's just worked really hard to make herself better.

I'm super excited about what this team is doing right now.

**Q. When you're trying to build a program, entering your third year, what is the challenge to build something when you're constantly dealing with change? The theme today we've been talking a lot about the growth of women's basketball. For you, what has it felt to see the growth and where do you see that it still has to go?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: Okay. So I just think the growth, I'll answer that first. The growth has been amazing. I think it's been growing for a long time. It's just been getting better and better. I think people are just now taking notice. Not just now, but more and more people are taking notice. It's been amazing I think.

NIL opportunities have helped with that, as well, because you see our players, they're out there making money, but I also see them working harder to get there. That has been amazing.

The other question was?

**Q. (On building a team in the face of change.)**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

JOHNNIE HARRIS: You try to keep your players, but they have that right, the transfer portal. It's really hard.

We took over a similar program in a similar place at Mississippi State. Our first class in four years played for a national championship. We graduated four seniors, and the next class played for a national championship. Then we graduated four seniors, and the next class was No. 1 in the country, No. 1 seed. We lost in the Elite Eight, but won the SEC tournament. We were able to retain those kids. We were able to develop 'em.

It's harder now. You just have to try to retain those kids and just do the best you can at developing 'em. I think the portal is really important. The portal helped us this year. It helped us get players that fit. That has been amazing for us 'cause otherwise you're starting with freshmen every year.

Now I think a lot of people are going to transfers because once they transfer, that one-time transfer is over, so now you can develop. They come in with a little bit of experience, rather than just having a freshman.

We still recruit the freshmen, but I just think the difference is the transfer portal. You have to go that way.

**Q. What is the culture you're trying to establish? Do you have a roster that can run your type of offense and defense?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: Yes, so we're young in some spots, but the culture that I'm trying to establish is one that's tough. Our core value, we use the word 'tough'. You have to be tough in everything you do. That's on and off the court. So we look for that. We look for that in our players. We use the word 'tough'. The T is tough, hard-nosed, physical and aggressive.

The O is ownness, having the ownness of your team. When I told our team that, they were like, Why wouldn't you just say ownership?

I said, Well, you own a pair of shoes in your closet that you probably don't wear anymore. When you have ownership of something, you will fight for it. Just trying to instill that in them.

The U is having that unbreakable bond.

The G is giving, having a giving heart, a giving spirit to go out and support others, but also giving to your teammate, doing whatever you need to do to help this program be successful.

And H is honesty, the integrity that you have for the name on the front as well as the name on the back of your jersey.

Just that is just trying to get those kids to embrace that and build from that.

**Q. Taylen said she feels like this team is in a rebuild this year. Do you agree with that? What are your expectations for the team?**

JOHNNIE HARRIS: I feel like we were in a rebuild last year. I feel like we're ahead of where we were. We're a lot farther along right now than we were last year just in putting things in and grasping concepts and our mentality towards playing defense the way I want to play defense and understanding what we're looking for on offense. I just think this team, because of the maturity, because of the junior college and the transfers we got, I feel like we have more maturity on this team.

I feel like the sky's the limit for this team. I feel like we have the depth that we didn't have last year. So I'm just looking forward to continuing to build one step at a time. I'm looking for big things out of this team. I really don't feel like it's a rebuild year.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

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