

# Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

## Vanderbilt Commodores Coach Mark Byington

### Men's Media Day Press Conference



MARK BYINGTON: Thank you, all. The first thing that I want to make sure that I state is it's an honor to not only coach at Vanderbilt but to be in the SEC. People talk all the time about are you worried about the teams, the top 25 teams, everything else. The reason I'm at Vanderbilt and in this league is because it's the best. There's challenges, and it's the best coaches, environments, and I want to be a part of that.

Right now we're trying to build Vanderbilt to be one of the better teams in the SEC and also the country. We know it's a work in progress and how we're going to get here considering how good the league is.

But it's something we're excited about. And we don't run from challenges, I don't, and I'm trying to find guys on my team very similar. We've had great practices and preparation up to this point. And then we're a little less than three weeks away from kicking it off, and I know we're excited about that.

**Q. Just wanted to ask you about bringing in so many new guys to try to fit into your system. What's it like X's and O's-wise trying to get all those guys to reprogram themselves and work on your verbiage and the systems that you want to implement versus what they're used to?**

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, it's a challenge when you've got to replace basically the entire roster. I brought one player with me from James Madison, but at the same time, they've got to learn not only my system, my style, they've got to learn each other.

The way we play is not just running set plays. It's a read-react, it's a conceptual base, and there's a lot that goes into that. Where we are now is better than we were last year and better than we were two weeks ago. And we'll keep getting better along the way, and that's why we

don't have to be out our best right now. But the goal is to keep getting better along the way.

It's almost the nature of college athletics right now. There's a coaching change, the natural evolution is guys put their name in the transfer portal. And it did help us on the other end. If we didn't have the transfer portal, we wouldn't have a team right now. But we were able to find guys who had different measures of success, where they were before, and they're excited to be at Vanderbilt, and we've got to try to put them together quickly.

**Q. A lot has been made over the years of Vanderbilt and that it's a tough place to win, but you've really embraced it and said you expect not to rebuild but to win in year one. What about Vanderbilt makes you feel so confident that it's ready for that?**

MARK BYINGTON: Well, I think it's unfair for the guys on my team right now. If I brought in a grad transfer and said we're going to build for the future, that's unfair to them. They've got one year of college athletics left, and I want to make it the best possible I can with them, help them team-wise, help them individual-wise, help them make great memories along the way.

There is going to be a building process. You love that continuity, but we're not afforded that right now. We can't make excuses saying it's going to take time. What we've got to do is try to be as good as we possibly can right now with this team at this moment.

And I think we've got the right type of guys to be successful. How successful, we'll see, but it's going to be a fun journey with them.

**Q. Obviously last season at James Madison you win over 30 games, have a lot of success there. How much of an adjustment has it been to move from James Madison and the Sun Belt to Vanderbilt and the SEC, and how have you approached handling that kind of move?**

MARK BYINGTON: Well, the SEC, I haven't had those games and those moments yet. But the big adjustment for



myself and really our team has been the recruiting process. It's not -- everybody else is going through it, whether they've been in the SEC or not, but we're just dealing with a whole different animal in recruiting.

So we're trying to get the best talent, the best fit, the best team, and that's where the challenges are. Us getting settled in to our team, our style, our fit, we're working on all that. But I know what's ahead of us when we get to SEC. It's going to be a monster. It's going to be really tough.

But the biggest challenges right now is putting together a roster and then also building a future roster, what we're doing right now in recruiting with the high school players.

**Q. Obviously you guys were last in the preseason poll. AJ earlier said that you guys have taken on a chip because of that. Is that something you've seen throughout the team over the last couple days?**

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, I didn't even know when the poll came out. I just heard this morning that we were picked last. Look, this is my 12th year as a head coach, and I've been picked every single place possible -- first, last. And the good thing is I know some people had some votes, it's not normally right, and there's going to be a lot of things decided between now and then. If we've got to take on an underdog role and a prove people wrong role, that's great, we'll adjust to that.

But at the same time, it's not something that we were going to get caught up in. Whatever number somebody else thinks we are, that's going to be a weakness, so we're going to try to focus on who we are and the best we can be.

**Q. For those of us that didn't see you at Georgia Southern or didn't see you in the NCAA Tournament at James Madison, describe for us the way your team plays and the style.**

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, I think the first thing you'll notice when you watch my team is the pace. We're an up-tempo -- my teams are usually top 40 in the country in tempo, and right now we're probably playing faster than I ever have. It's not something I'm saying we'll play slower, and we will adjust, but if you watch the tempo of our team, it's really fast.

Then, at the same time, too, you'll watch our team, and we're going to try to stick with some things -- take care of the ball, get the right shot, play together, play the right way.

And I always take it as a big compliment, I know coaches always takes it as a compliment, somebody says how hard

your team plays and how much they compete. I want us to make sure that they're saying it about us this year, too. I love it when somebody watches my team and says that. I hope they're saying it about our Vanderbilt team, too.

**Q. There's been a lot of talk about the SEC and the amount of potential bids to the NCAA Tournament it could have this season, a lot of talk of potentially even double-digit teams getting into the Big Dance. Last year you win 30 games at James Madison, and if you don't win the conference tournament, you might not get in. Is it somewhat of a relief to get into a league that maybe is always going to be multiple bids, and does that change the approach at all?**

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, when you're at a mid major level, you always have a complaint that we don't have potential for Quad 1 wins, especially at home. The SEC, every game is Quad 1 or Quad 2.

When the leagues are really good like the SEC is, I don't think there's such a thing as a bad loss. There's just the potential for good wins. You've got to stack them together, get as many of them as you can. But it's a great problem to have for the SEC to have a lot of good teams, and that means there's chances for good wins out there.

I know the SEC is anxious, and we talked about our league meetings for teams to make runs in the NCAA Tournament. We're going to try to beat each other up in the regular season and then hopefully some SEC teams are making some deep runs to the Final Four and that, as well.

It is to the point where, look, everybody is good. Everybody is all in. Everybody is committed. You can sit there and run from it or you can try to embrace it and try to do the best you can and figure out, but we're going to figure out how to compete against good teams. We don't have the option of going against bad teams or cupcakes, whatever you want to say. Every team is going to be good, so you'd better figure out how to be successful in that.

**Q. Just to go back to your system and integrating new players, how much does that read-and-react style, the fluidity of it, and the core principles help you to early in the season kind of get the base of it put in, and then once you get that going then you can kind of put in some of the wrinkles and some of the sets that come out of that?**

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, I hope when you look at our team, and you're going to see one team in November, and then hopefully you're looking at us in February and it's a dramatically better team.

If we're doing our job as coaches and our players are doing their job as learning and getting better, we're going to get there.

But I think you're going to watch a lot of teams, not just our newness and Vanderbilt, just have some awkward moments in November, but at the same time, there's so many roster changes with every team, and it does take time.

I'm not asking for time, but it does take time to figure out how to get guys good and how to figure out how to play together because it is a team sport.

Just the individual players can't be successful unless there's a group of them with the same mission, the same principles as them.

You'll see us keep getting better. We're already looking that way in our practices. If you saw us in the first practice, we probably had 40 turnovers and threw the ball everywhere, and now you look at us and we're getting better along the way, and hopefully we're on the same trajectory throughout the season.

**Q. A lot has been made of your offensive philosophy. Can you take us through how you developed that and how you figured out that was the scheme you wanted to run when you got into this?**

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, my offense is a mix of things that I've seen along the way. I used to be a fan of the Phoenix Suns when Mike D'Antoni was there, and I thought he was innovative. Then, now, if you kind of look on what I'm watching, it's a lot of European basketball. NBA is getting that way.

There is analytics involved in what we want to do and how we want to play, but then at the same time I think it's a fun way to play when we play positionless basketball. Multiple guys can handle the ball, multiple guys can make plays.

I can't tell you how many times where we were in the spring in recruiting and a player would watch how we play and say, That's how I want to play. What we want to do is continue that, expand on it, and then continue having better players along the way because I'm not -- I'm a good coach, but I'm a better coach when I've got better players.

Our styles got to fit, the guys we're recruiting. But at the same time, our offense, it's pace, it's tempo, it's spacing, it's sharing the ball, it's playing the right way.

**Q. Obviously you've got a lot of older guys and**

**obviously a lot of guys who have done things. How difficult is it for you to firm your rotation?**

MARK BYINGTON: Yeah, it is a challenge. The thing that we might have as a benefit is I feel like I've got 10 or 11 guys that can play. Our success might dictate our strength in numbers, might help us be successful.

One of the things I looked at when I took the job, I just decided I didn't want to be young in the SEC in year one. Young guys in college sports and college athletics is tough. I mean, there's still the extra COVID year, there's grown men out there playing that are 23, 24 years old, and I didn't want to go out there with a bunch of 18-year-olds.

It's going to change now. The COVID year is going away and high school recruiting is going to come back more, but at the same time it's a philosophy of ours to get old as fast as possible.

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