

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Alabama Crimson Tide

Nate Oats

Men's Media Day Press Conference



NATE OATS: It's true, RFK Jr. would not be happy with my 7-11 I sold in the classroom, so we were not that healthy, and I have three girls, so we made plenty of trips to Disney and enjoyed it. But looking forward to talking about our team this year. I'll open with a quick statement.

I think last year we were picked fifth. We've been picked fifth three times now. We won the SEC regular season tournament two of those and made a Final Four in the other one. I was hoping maybe we'd get picked fifth again because it's worked out well for us.

Our roster is not such that anybody is picking us fifth, so people have asked me whether we would rather come in under the radar and surprise people or -- obviously we got picked in the AP poll second, or be picked to win, and I'd say I'd much rather have the roster I currently have and deal with where we're picked, and we'll have to create some other type of motivational factors because we won't have a chip on our shoulder from getting picked fifth or whatever.

The games still have to get played on the court, and there's some really good teams in this league. Look at South Carolina who's picked to finish last last year and tied second with us last year. I think some of the teams that maybe some people are thinking aren't going to be as good are going to be pretty good.

And there's nine teams ranked in the top 25 in our league, which is more than anybody in the country. I think it speaks to the level of coaching going on in our league and the number of athletes we've been able to get in the SEC.

We put together a really tough non-conference schedule to prepare us for the tough SEC schedule. We've got 15 of our 31 games will be against teams in the preseason top 25.

It'll get us ready to go, and we're coming right out of the gate with a pretty tough schedule. Looking forward to the year. I'll open it up to questions if you have some.

Q. How tough is this SEC landscape in this league compared to the rest of the conference with all the talent coming back?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I think it's real tough. You look at some of the better players coming back in the league, and shoot, even some better players in the country that have transferred into the league, people ask who do I think is going to be challenging at the top? And I obviously -- you can rattle off some of the ones that are picked by the writers, but shoot, there's teams that aren't ranked in the top 5 preseason that I think are going to be really tough outs.

I think the league has gotten better and better since I've gotten into the league. It'll be year six now, which I can't believe it's been that long, but there's no easy games, particularly road games in the SEC, and that's part of the reason I try to schedule so tough in the non-conference, to get us ready for SEC play.

And I think we've done that again this year with our non-conference schedule as best we can. There's nothing like going into a place like Auburn. You're not going to replicate that. We are on the road at Purdue, which is going to be a tough place to play. But going into Auburn or Arkansas or Kentucky, Tennessee, there's some really tough road venues with some very good coaches and really good teams in this league.

Q. I was going to ask you about being not picked fifth. But talking to your players, they said that's in the past. Are you using that at all, or new season, you're not thinking about that?

NATE OATS: I mean, we obviously used it in recruiting to get some of them here, but I don't really want to talk about that much with the team. I kind of told them we had the celebration Friday where we raised the banner and gave out the rings, and the issue is 8 out of our 13 scholarship guys weren't here last year.



And that was last year. It's kind of old news. It's great for the program, for the fans, for the university to be able to celebrate it, but it has nothing to do with what we've got going on this year.

We're trying to flip the page, move on, not really address it. It was nice. It was great. It was good for our league, good for our school, good for our program, but we've got to focus on what we've got to do this year, and that's what we're trying to get our guys minds at.

Q. You clearly had a vision for this roster. Like you said, a lot of new players being taken in. Has there been anything that's really -- through those evaluations, has there been anything that's surprised you about this team in the first few months of practice thus far?

NATE OATS: You know what, I don't know if it would be necessarily a surprise. I would say some of the freshmen have been maybe better than anticipated. The first one comes to mind is Labaron Philon. He's been great. He's been really good on both sides of the ball. He's pushing our veteran guards, making them better every day in practice. And he's going to get minutes, some games significant minutes. He's been good.

Derrion Reid, when he's been healthy, he's been really good. His IQ is really high. He's going to contribute. He's smart. He's athletic. He's got great size.

Aiden Sherrell has been maybe better than what we thought.

Even some of the transfers that have come in, just the leadership, you hope you get really good high-character guys and you do enough research and you try to get those guys, but these guys have been better than even what we thought they were going to be between -- Chris has been an unbelievable leader. Houston has been great, like really good leader. Cliff is an unbelievable guy, too. And I think Holloway just wants to get back to playing really good basketball. He's been really good, too.

Just kind of the character and leadership of the new guys and some of the young guys are maybe better than what we thought they were going to be here early.

Q. A lot of change in the SEC going into this season. What was your reaction to Cal's move from Kentucky to Arkansas, and what prompted you before the search had begun to put your name out there and say I'm staying here?

NATE OATS: My reaction is Cal is one of the best coaches in the history of college basketball, and Arkansas is a program that's got some pride. I can't speak for him as to why he maybe moved, but sometimes if you want a fresh start -- shoot, he's going to get talent. He's one of the best recruiters ever to coach in college basketball, and he's got a lot of talent there right away.

He's familiar with the league. He's a great recruiter. Arkansas got a good basketball tradition. He made the move, and then that kind of opened the job at Kentucky up.

I had signed a contract at Alabama. We were in the process of putting a roster together. There's a lot of speculation out there. We had just made the Final Four. I think that was maybe two days after -- I think it was a Monday of the championship game.

So I just thought it was appropriate that instead of everybody asking us in recruiting -- it wasn't even like a job offer that happened. I didn't try to act like I had been offered it. It wasn't the case. We wanted to get our fan base, the owners that maybe were contributing to collectives. We wanted to get the recruits.

I wanted to make sure everybody knew I was happy at Alabama. We're putting a roster together, we just had a great year, we think we can be a lot better next year, let's focus in here. I've got three daughters, I'm very comfortable, love it in Tuscaloosa. Just make sure everybody that needs to know knows I'm saying here. So that's kind of why we decided to put that statement out.

Q. You guys have been good ever since you got there, but you're actually ranked higher than your football team, which has not probably happened a whole lot. I know Alabama has had a lot of good basketball, but what's it like being ranked higher than the football team? And the league has been good for a lot of years but never had nine ranked in the preseason top 25, I don't believe. Does it feel better than it has been in the last few years?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I think the league is definitely better than it has been. Obviously adding Texas and Oklahoma to the mix helps us out a lot, two very good programs. Texas, top 25.

I think the coaching in the league has gotten better. I think even before I got in this league, they made a concerted effort to raise the level of basketball here, and I think you're seeing that come to fruition with the level of coaches they've gotten in, with the level of programs they've gotten into, and the level of talent we've had. You look at the number of NBA Draft picks and the athleticism.

The league is good. It's got more teams in the top 25 than any other league in the country. You've got to put together a roster to win in this league. We feel like we've done that.

To address the football deal, I think somebody made that comment to me. A couple years ago we hit No. 1 in the rankings, and maybe at the time football wasn't -- I think it was the first time it had ever happened.

My answer then, and it's kind of still the same, look, the level that the football program at Alabama has been at for an extremely long time, particularly since Coach Saban took over, is ridiculous. So just the amount of times they've been ranked No. 1, top 5 is absurd.

We're just trying to get the basketball program up to a championship level. There's six programs at Alabama that have won National Championships. Basketball is not one of them. We're trying to get it to that level. We feel like we're at a level we can compete for one. It's really hard to win one.

But we're still 18 National Championships behind football, and there will be 12 teams going to the Playoffs, and I'm assuming that Coach DeBoer is going to have his team in that 12. They looked pretty good when I was at that game against Georgia. We see how good they can be, and I don't know where they're ranked. I'm not really paying attention to it.

I think what matters is they get in the top 12 at the end of the season and go on a run and try to win a National Championship. We're going to try to get our ranking as high as we can going into the NCAA Tournament, go on a run, try to win a National Championship in basketball, as well.

Q. Nate, as far as managing minutes this season, what is the message you're giving to your guys, and what kind of mindset do you want them to have?

NATE OATS: Yeah, a couple things. One is we keep telling them it's not about how many points and this and that. It's are we better with you on the floor? Is our offensive efficiency better with you on the floor than when you're not? Is our defensive efficiency better with you on the floor?

So guys don't necessarily have to average a high number of points for our offense to be better on the floor. Are you a great screener? Do you play hard? Do you go to the O-boards? Do you do this? We're going to try to reward effort, reward winning plays.

The other thing is there's going to have to be some sacrifices made to win championships. The depth, the potential for us to be a very deep team is there. We've got talent. In order to build the depth, you have to get guys some playing time. There's some guys that last year were big parts of what we're doing that are going to have to take fewer minutes this year in order to build our depth.

It's more about what you do in your minutes than it is about how many minutes you play. It's more about what you do in the shots that you get than the actual shot attempts you actually take.

We're pressing that. Now, we haven't got to a game and minutes haven't got divvied up yet, but I think we've got guys that have a chance to be pros, and they would be better off playing fewer minutes and being more efficient in their fewer minutes than they would playing higher minutes.

We're going to obviously keep coaching it, teaching it, talking about it, but there's going to be plenty of games where a lot of the roster is not playing as many minutes as they want. Just hopefully our character takes over and whatever is best for the team and let's make sure we're locked into doing what's best for this team.

I kind of go back to a word we stole from softball last year. Coach Murphy came and spoke to the team. Their deal is mudita. We actually got it on our rings. But mudita is vicarious joy through someone else's success; can I be as happy when my teammate scores 20 as when I score 20; can I be as happy when he gets X number of minutes as when I do.

Hopefully we can take a hold of that mudita like we did last year. I thought that was pretty good at the end of last year for us.

Q. I wanted to ask you, the last couple years your rosters have kind of been built around players who transferred in and filled a position of need and then came back for another season under your system. How valuable is that, and how much can Sears, Nelson, Wrightsell, all those guys, lead the program, and now that they've learned what you want on the floor?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I think all three of those guys, Wrightsell and Nelson going into year two, Sears has been here multiple years, but all three of those guys are much more comfortable this year than they were last year in the system. They're doing a really good job coaching the younger guys up, what to look for, what to need. Grant is a lot more vocal, Wrightsell is a lot more vocal, Sears is a lot

more vocal.

I think it's big -- in college basketball it's important to be older, but I think you also need good young talent in. Well, if you can get the older guys to really bring the young talent along, I think those guys are doing that because some of our freshmen are playing really well. I think they're getting mentored pretty well by some of those veteran guys that have been with us.

Q. You talked about the Georgia football game a minute ago. We saw all the recruits that you had at that game, and we've seen all the recruits that have come through Tuscaloosa, especially the past couple years. What's it say about where this program is that you can bring so many guys in the door and you're bringing in such elite talent?

NATE OATS: Yeah, I can't speak to the particular recruits, but I'll say this: The recruiting is going really well. Winning helps that, obviously. Player development. We've done a really good job putting guys in the NBA. We've had six guys drafted, three lottery picks, Keon Ellis undrafted, but great chance to start for the Kings this year, started last year. Got seven guys playing on NBA roster with a lot more in the G-League.

Recruits are looking to be developed for the next level. I think we're doing a better job of that than most places in the country, and I think it speaks to the level of recruiting we've been able to get it to.

And University of Alabama's athletic department, arguably one of the best in the country. And we're getting basketball up to the standard that a lot of the other sports at Alabama have been at, and recruiting has fallen in line with where we've gotten the program to.

Q. Coach, what new skills have you brought with this recruiting talent this year, and what did you do this summer to get better as a coach?

NATE OATS: Yeah, so the new skills with the new recruits we've got in, we've got eight new guys in. I think the biggest area we tried to address this off-season was defensive rim protection. Bringing in Cliff and Aiden Sherrell both is going to be big, but we also brought in some long, athletic defenders.

We were the No. 1 scoring team in the country last year. Our offense wasn't our problem. Our defense was our issue. Everybody we brought in needed to be able to impact the game on the defensive end.

You look at the transfers we brought in, Cliff, maybe best

shot blocker in the country. Chris Youngblood, ultimate competitor. Houston Mallette, long, athletic defensive guy. The freshman, Derrion Reid, super versatile. Aiden Sherrell, rim protector. Labaron Philon has been maybe our best two-way guard every day in practice.

That's what we were looking to do. That's what we addressed in our recruiting needs this off-season, and I think we did a good job of that.

What did I do to get better in the off-season? I'm always trying to study NBA stuff, European stuff. I've been to two different training camps, went and spent some time with another NBA team, talked to some NBA coaches, just what are they doing. We're always trying to stay a step ahead. I feel like people are chasing us and how we play. We led the country in scoring last year, so how can we continue to get better.

One of the training camps I went to was the Knicks. I think Thibodeau is one of the best defensive coaches in the league. We needed help on our defense. I did spend some time with some offensive coaches in the NBA, but we also tried to shore up our defense.

One of my assistant coaches I hired, Brian Adams, came from the NBA. He was with Doc Rivers for a long time, worked under Thibs in the Boston when they won the championship, not this past year, but the previous one they had won. So I'm learning from him. He's doing a great job with our defense. I tried to learn from some NBA guys, met with some European coaches, studied some European stuff.

What I typically do in the off-season. It's a pretty typical off-season for me.

Q. I wanted to piggyback, kind of tell us a little bit about Brian Adams. I know you were meticulous in filling that staff spot. Also, how healthy is your team going into the exhibition opener against Wake Forest?

NATE OATS: Yeah, we interviewed a handful of guys. I was very meticulous, methodical. I didn't rush to make the hire. When Austin got the job with Texas San Antonio, it kind of left a roster spot open, and our biggest need was defense.

Charlie Henry had done a great job running our defense for four years. He had us top three in the country two out of those four years, and we weren't anywhere close to that last year.

That falls on me as a coach, so I need to get somebody in here to help do it. So everybody we interviewed, just



basically told them, if you can't coach a top-5 defense in the country, don't bother applying or talking to me.

So we kind of narrowed it down, went through some Zooms with my staff, with a few guys. I thought Brian has run a defense, he's done it in the NBA, he's been a G-League coach. He's coached in college before. He was at two different colleges. So he had some college experience.

I think he works extremely hard. He's a big video guy. He's doing a great job with it.

Our defense is going to be markedly improved from last year, due in part to him, due in part to, again, roster -- roster is more important than the coaches, but we do have to have a coach that knows what he's doing, and I think he's doing a great job.

Health-wise going into Friday's exhibition against Wake Forest here in Birmingham, Youngblood is out until sometime in December, so he won't be available. Anybody that watched our intersquad scrimmage last Friday, Wrightsell and Aiden Sherrell were both out. I don't anticipate either of them being back by the Wake Forest scrimmage. Hopefully Wrightsell will be back by the Memphis scrimmage up in Huntsville, and then maybe Aiden Sherrell we're hoping to get back by Game 1. Other than that, we should be good to go on Friday.

Q. Question about that exhibition in Huntsville. Could you speak on the opportunity of taking on likely a preseason conference favorite in Memphis and the value of playing that neutral site up in Huntsville and exposing the program to north Alabama, and what it means to the program, as well?

NATE OATS: Yeah, we've played Memphis in the past. We had a series with them. I'd like to continue to play them. Hopefully we can schedule a series. They're close being right there in Memphis. Penny does a great job recruiting really good talent in there. Huntsville is somewhere kind of between us and Memphis, so I thought it made sense.

I like to play different places in the state. Huntsville is -- shoot, I think they might be the biggest city in the state now. Somebody told me that. There's a lot of people up there that are Alabama fans up in Huntsville that we want to get in front of, and we weren't able to schedule a regular season game up there.

So I thought this was the next best alternative to go play an exhibition, and I'm looking forward to it. Mark Sears from Muscle Shoals up towards Huntsville. We've had players

come out of there. John Petty was a great player for us up there. There's recruits. They've got good basketball up there in Huntsville.

We wanted to make sure we got up that way. Memphis is a good team to play. I'm looking forward to it. We've got Wake Forest this Friday in Birmingham. We've also got a regular season game against Illinois in Birmingham, and then the game up there in Huntsville, and then last year we were able to go down and play -- that might have been two years ago we went down to Mobile, played south Alabama in Mobile. But we've tried to get to different places in the state year to year, obviously, trying to every year get to Birmingham and then go to some different ones throughout the course of the year.

Looking forward to it. Appreciate you guys. We'll see you during the year.

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