

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Ole Miss Rebels

Coach Chris Beard

Men's Media Day Press Conference



CHRIS BEARD: Any questions? Is this going to be something about Arkansas?

Q. Possibly.

CHRIS BEARD: I told you last year, loved my year at Little Rock. Special team. Had a couple players on that team that were good enough to play in the SEC. I loved the food in downtown Little Rock, got great family and friends there. Be really interested in answering a question today about anything Ole Miss or SEC basketball.

Q. You and Porter are both UALR alums, and Porter talked about it. He talked about you guys doing a clinic in Hot Springs a couple of years ago. I wonder what you think about two ex-UALR coaches coaching big-time programs in the SEC and how being at UALR maybe helped you get to where you are now.

CHRIS BEARD: Yeah, Porter is a friend. Coaches use that word "friend" pretty loosely, friend. But I think with Porter and I, it's a little bit different. A lot of respect for Porter, his journey along the way.

We competed against each other in the Big 12 for a brief time, both as head coaches. Welcome him and Rodney to the league. I think Oklahoma and Texas will both be great additions to SEC basketball, which in my opinion is the premier league. I know other leagues can make a case, but our league can make a case, as well. Really competitive league. But my friendship with Porter and my time at Arkansas Little Rock is really important to me.

Q. What have you seen from Dre Davis so far?

CHRIS BEARD: This is our second Ole Miss team. We're excited. A lot of internal optimism. It's based on one thing at the top of the list: We've got good players.

You mentioned Dre Davis. We've got six players coming in from the portal. All six are really talented. They have undeniable bodies of work as individual players, stat line, minutes, wins, several played in the NCAA Tournament.

With Dre specifically, the first thing that really attracted me to Dre, speaking from my point of view, is he's very, very competitive. Every coach that we talked to in the recruiting process, not only his college coaches but going back to guys that coached him when he was younger, the first thing was always competitive. A skill player. What he got done in the Big East was real. Winning the NIT championship was real, the teams that they had to beat that time of year to get to the championship game.

We think Dre has a chance to be one best players in the SEC. I understand what a strong statement that is, but he's guy that can play a lot of different positions, can guard a lot of different people. He's competitive. He's tough. My argument would be that he'll be talked a lot about this year in the SEC because he's going to be one of the best players in our league.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Matthew Murrell. He was All-SEC Second Team last year, and he's back for you this year. How can he continue to grow, and what do you expect from him in this season coming up?

CHRIS BEARD: Yeah, we're really glad to have Matt Murrell back for what will be his last year of college basketball. I've said this before, not to repeat myself, but Matt is one of the best players I've ever coached in college. We've benefitted from his time with Kermit Davis who did a great job at Ole Miss and laid us a foundation.

Matt is a good basketball player. He plays on both ends of the floor. I think his recognition being an All-SEC player is real. It's deserving. I think if our team would have won some more games, he would have been a First-Team All-Conference player. I think he's one of the handful of top five or six players in this league in my opinion.

We're going to expect a lot from Matt this year. What he has to do I think to help us is that basically have his best season he's ever had with consistency. For many years



he's proven that he can get a lot done in an SEC game. I think the challenge for Matt is can we have his best every single night or can we have his best at a higher rate than we had it in the past. So consistency is the deal with Matt.

We're blessed to have him back. I think our league benefits, too, with Matt coming back. He did a really good job in last year's pre-draft in the NBA. He had a real decision to make at the 99th hour. So for him to come back to Ole Miss, it obviously makes us better, but I think it makes our league better, as well.

Q. Over the last decade, aside from the success that you've had, you've shown drastic improvement win-wise from the first year to the second year, whether it be Angelo State, Texas Tech and then Texas. What was the common denominator in all three of those from one year to the next, and in what ways do you feel like this group so far, working with them, is kind of ahead of the curve in that regard?

CHRIS BEARD: Yeah, I think we have had some success in year two. I think above all, simple easy answer to that question, players. That's what's happened. We've had really good players the second year.

Some of those we've been able to develop, guys that we had the first year and were able to get back. This year's Ole Miss team, we have three groups of players. One is returners, six players that were on the team last year, three were in major minute rotation, four played.

I think when you start thinking about second-year success, the first thing is the players. We've been really benefiting, whether it be at Angelo or Texas Tech or Texas or now Ole Miss. The chance to coach guys for the second year is real.

Another thing, there's no denying the first year is a lot about -- you hear this all the time, it's a cliché, but you're building your culture. A lot goes into that. I've always thought by the time you get to second year you can start defending it. There's a difference between building and defending.

We have had some success in year two. We have very high expectations this year in Oxford. We believe we have the players, the talent on the roster, the fan base, the leadership with our chancellor and AD. So we have a lot of good things going on our way, and we're really excited about getting the season started here in a few weeks.

Q. You guys -- well, wherever you've been prior to Ole Miss, your teams have been really physical, been able to guard, defend at a high level. Obviously you

struggled a little bit with that last year. Do you feel like this is going to be a more physical group, whether it's a guy like Malik, who can move and play positionless, or Brakefield being back? Do you feel better about your defensive side of the ball?

CHRIS BEARD: Yes, and I do think one of the parts of our defensive identity will be physical toughness, kind of grit, experience. We're one of the oldest if not the oldest team in college basketball. We have 10 seniors on this roster. We've got guys -- I think the SID does a great job with us at Ole Miss. He was showing me some things, under 1,000 minutes played, multiple 1,000-point scorers, combine our three-point percentages, exciting things kind of on paper. But there's no denying we have a physical toughness, kind of an experience that I think needs to be one of the parts of our defensive side at this.

What we might lack in the typical kind of long, athletic college basketball player that we all benefit, we certainly have a young player, John Bol, in our program that fits that NBA mold in terms of his body type. We have a lot of college players that have a chance to be really good pros because of their strength and experience.

Defensively that will be a part of our DNA if we execute like we all want to.

Q. I know you guys were ranked at times last year, and you're in the preseason poll. I honestly can't remember the last time that happened at Ole Miss. Maybe under Rob Evans or somebody. But I know it's a preseason poll, but how big a deal is that when you're trying to build up your program, and what do you think about nine SEC basketball teams being ranked? I think that's more than football teams were ranked in preseason, and what do you think about the league as a whole and how many bids you guys can realistically expect?

CHRIS BEARD: I think the first part of that question, I've only been at Ole Miss two years. So for us to be nationally ranked going into the season, that's one of the objectives. To win six games in three weekends and to be a team that can compete for a National Championship, which is what our goal is, period, it helps to be one of those top 25 or 30 teams before the season starts.

It can be done the other way. We did that with our elite team at Texas Tech. I thought we were good enough that year to win the championship, and I don't believe that team was pre-ranked in the preseason.

Proud of that. We don't spend any time talking with that with our players about the rankings. But I think to be



recognized I think is good for our fan base. I think our coaches have done a really good job recruiting.

In today's world, if you can get kind of a ranking, really it's respect for your players more than anything. It's the people that make the votes, looking at where players play, because you're not really looking at this team was really good last year. Few exceptions on that because everybody has new players.

I think it's a positive remark towards the talent we have on our roster. So I give our staff a lot of credit and the recruiting on that.

What was the second part of that question?

Q. The SEC having nine teams, what that says --

CHRIS BEARD: Yeah, I think when you look at it, to me it's pretty easy to figure out nine, but then I'm looking at 10, 11, 12, and they should be in there, too.

Look, I think the SEC, I was so impressed year one. You've got championship coaches, Hall of Fame guys, guys that will be in the Hall of Fame. You've got really good players. Obviously the NBA Draft picks, more SEC players on opening day. We know the stats. Then you've got a lot of really good college basketball players that might not play in the NBA one day, but they're going to feed their families for many years, some of the best players in college basketball.

I think your home venues, we didn't go anywhere last year that I thought was going to be an easy night for us to play, and I was looking for one. Great fan bases, great environments.

I think the league is real. So when you start talking about the best basketball conference, I do believe it's the SEC.

Other conferences can make their case, but I know this, there's not a conference that's any better than the SEC in men's basketball, period. To see the rankings, NCAA bids, and the reality last year it's real. We benefitted from that at Ole Miss.

One of the great things about coaching at Ole Miss, yes, we have the best college town in the country, Oxford. Yes, we have great administration. Yes, we have great academics. All that stuff is real. But we also get to play in the SEC. This league is as good as advertised. It's where the top recruits want to play. So we certainly benefit from being in the Southeastern Conference.

Q. What's been more difficult to navigate, transfer

portal or NIL?

CHRIS BEARD: For me personally, you ask me the question, probably the name, image, and likeness. Not difficult in terms of not being supportive of it. I love it, period. I was on the record long ago, players should benefit from this sport that does so much for so many people.

But I think just because the rules are coming at you hot and heavy, it's like the wild, wild west; things change by the hour, not by the day. That's been a challenge.

I think with the transfer portal, just my experience in basketball, which I'm proud of, in junior college we had the transfer portal, and in Division II we had the transfer portal. So we've always kind of benefitted from the ability to change a team from year to year based on your needs, but I could see where that could be a challenge for somebody that doesn't have the experience that we've had over the years.

Q. I know over the course of the off-season you've talked about your non-conference schedule and what you want to accomplish out of that. Obviously this one looking pretty tough on the surface. Right away when you took this job it seemed you kept the regionality aspect of it, where there's pockets of alumni, whether it be Southaven near Memphis or Biloxi. At what point when this job happened did this conversation come about, and how important is that to you factoring everything else with the non-conference schedule?

CHRIS BEARD: Yeah, I think every coach has a different philosophy on scheduling based on the job you're at. At Ole Miss there's a lot of things we're trying to get done, and this year, our second year schedule is upgraded. We're heading in the right direction.

We'll play in one of the best MTEs in college basketball: BYU, Purdue and NC State, three NCAA Tournament teams. Two of those teams were in the Final Four last year. Road game opportunity at Louisville. It's a great opportunity for our team. Road games like at Memphis, real game.

Part of the responsibility I think when you coach at the University of Mississippi is to take your brand and your team to other parts of the state. We have a lot of great fans, alumni, donors. So for this year to play in Southaven near Memphis against Colorado State, a team that's been in two of the last three NCAA tournaments, and then you go back down to the coast and play Biloxi and Southern Miss, that game is ripe for basketball in



Mississippi.

I do think that's one of the responsibilities of the head coach of Ole Miss is to think about from time to time what is good for the game of basketball in the state of Mississippi.

I'm happy for our fans. We've upgraded the schedule. We've got some exciting games. We've got some home games. We've got some neutral site games. But, yeah, I think this year's schedule is going to give us an opportunity to do some things in the non-conference. I told the guys yesterday in our meeting, the schedule is going to give you opportunity, and as a player that's all you can really ask for, and as a coach, same thing.

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