

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Arkansas Razorbacks

Coach Mike Neighbors

Women's Media Day Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We welcome University of Arkansas head coach Mike Neighbors.

Let's go straight to questions.

Q. Going into the season, you were picked at the bottom of the polls. What do you think about preseason polls and that perception right now?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Certainly a huge part of what we do in our sport. I'm used to them. I've been a part of 32 of them. Have never one time finished where the poll predicted, 0-32 on that.

We're going to focus on making sure we don't finish where we're predicted.

I do understand them. I appreciate everybody that votes in 'em. I don't think anybody that voted has been to a practice yet.

So I don't put a lot of stock into it, mainly because, again, we've never finished there. Whether we were picked to finish third one year, we finished fifth. We've never finished where we were picked.

I know it's a part of what we do. I have openly campaigned in the past to only release the top eight in other leagues. We started in the Pac-12. The Big Ten does it. It can sometimes hurt the programs that are picked in the bottom because of the perception, and then you have to answer questions to recruits. Not you. We're fine. Me and you can talk all the time. But I have to answer that question to a recruit.

In our league, I can tell you this, somebody has a double-digit number beside them is going to make the tournament this year. I'll predict that right now. Somebody who in the preseason poll has a double-digit number

beside their name will be in the NCAA tournament.

That's how good the league is. And you just added two teams that have been to every NCAA tournament, except for one or two, since I've been born.

I understand why we have 'em. I don't like being picked at the bottom. Neither do my players. But I tried to explain to our players yesterday when that hit, it's not about them. It's about what he did at the end of last year and who we lost to.

I think we're in a good spot about it. You know I coach in reality world. So let's talk about it. It is an important part to our game. It gets a buzz going, whether it's positive or negative. You have to be able to take the good with the bad. That's where we're at right now. We're solely focused now on making sure we don't finish there.

Q. What kind of player and what kind person is South Carolina getting with Maryam Dauda?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Great kid. Phenomenal learner. Still best basketball ahead of her. If you watched last night, you saw some things that obviously make her very special at her size. First shot she made was a three-pointer. Defensive, will learn a lot around Coach Staley and how they coach defense. This is a kid you'll see in the WNBA without a doubt.

A phenomenal, phenomenal kid. We'll pull for her except for one next year.

Q. We had this discussion about the AAU. You're kind of drifting away from that now with the NIL and transfer portal. Why do you embrace European players or players from other countries on your team?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Two-part question. You're asking about the AAU stuff, all that.

We're still recruiting. We, in fact, have about half and half. The reason I'm embracing international, did anybody else watch the Olympics? They're catching us, okay? The basketball being played worldwide now is at a much higher

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level than it was 10, 15 years ago.

The fact that our men's and women's teams are not dominating in the Olympic Games anymore is a little bit of a snapshot of what's at the younger ages there. We're trying to beat everybody to that. When it comes to the revenue share, NIL, none of us really know what that is. It's still to be determined.

Until I know the rules of the game, I'm going to try to find the best players that fit where we live. With Walmart in our area and all the other great businesses, the international culture is huge. We've been successful at attracting kids to Fayetteville, which maybe in the past wouldn't have been true.

Q. Your players were talking about a piggy bank that y'all have. Can you talk about what that is.

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Yeah. So it's an investment visual I want them to have. Each of us have one. Thanks to Signature Bank for giving them to us. It's a plastic piggy bank. Anytime I make a deposit into their banks, now I feel like I can take something out of their banks when I need to.

When I need to talk to them about going to class, about anything, I've got something invested in them. It's in their bank. I give them a little sheet of paper, fold it up. Sometimes they're all the same, sometimes they're personal to that particular player, ways we've invested in them.

I think sometimes you can lose sight about how much investment goes both ways. Until I have invested into them, I'm not going to take any deposits out of them.

Talking to somebody the other night about coaching these days. All the changes we've had, the one thing that stayed really the same, I'm going to coach 'em as hard as I'm going to love 'em. That's what that bank is going to show 'em.

I'm going to have to take some deposits. I took some out already. I tell them, Bring your bank up here.

And they're like, Oh, God, what did I do?

It's a little bit of a way to know I've invested in them in the past so I feel like I'm able to take a little deposit out when I need to, not that I have nothing invested in you.

I hope they do it with each other. Like anything else, I have some kids that are really into it, some other kids that don't have a lot going on with it. If I can help one kid, one relationship, between me and them, them and each other,

then it's going to be time well-spent.

Glad they brought that up, by the way.

Q. What are some of the advantages, talent aside, from having so many international players on one team? What are some of the challenges, language perhaps, communication?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: To the first part of your question, the advantages, you've got people together that are going through similar transitions. I'd always been told -- I went and studied. I talked to a bunch of coaches that have got a number of international students on their roster. And they all across the board said if you're going to have two, you need to have four, five or six. Don't have one or two because they will feel very siloed, isolated, they won't be open to talking and learning.

We always kind of had in the back of our mind when we decided to make this transition it would be about half and half. I don't want to cut out recruiting domestically as well. We still have too many great relationships and too many good things happening. We weren't able to get some of the SEC-caliber kids. Let's get kids from international countries, try to get American kids, and let's build a roster of 50/50. That's about what we have right now.

I think the challenges of it are, like you said, we do literally have to slow down. Every word that comes out of my mouth is new, and they might not understand it. It doesn't help that I have a very strong Arkansas dialect. There are American kids that still need me subtitled. I get it.

I think it has made us all better coaches. That's kind of gone down our hallway. We have to be very much more intentional than we've ever been about the words that we use, when we use 'em and our tone. We have to be willing to slow down.

I would tell you I feel like we probably are a little bit behind in the playbook area, all of those things. I think we're way ahead in some of the other things because we have been intentional and very slow in what we are doing.

Q. You haven't had too many coaching changes. You had one this off-season. You brought in Nick Bradford. I wanted to ask you about him and what he's going to bring to your staff.

MIKE NEIGHBORS: Sure. I think staff stability is very, very important. We've worked really hard to do it. You're going to have some from time to time.

Nick is somebody I knew his older brother. He and I were

the same age. I followed Nick's career not only as a player, but as a coach when he went to the women's side, like I did. He started coaching grassroots at a young age, coached some high school, and then he jumped in at Wichita State. That is my sign he is really committed to this, a Fayetteville guy.

Since he's been back, we've had more visitors on our floor probably than we've had all along. I thought it was important not only to bring somebody in, he can still do it a little bit, too. If I demonstrate a move and a finishing move, my players laugh at me. Rightfully so. But when Coach Nick does it, Oh, that's how it's supposed to look like.

Not only does he bring the familiarity with being from Arkansas, but he can still go out and demonstrate. He's an unbelievable developer of relationships. He just fit in very seamlessly.

Q. You have two new teams in the conference from your region. Maybe some would take that as a negative. Is that a positive because you can attract players from those two states to play in the SEC?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: I think it's both. It makes our recruiting pond a little smaller. Used to I was able to say we're the western-most SEC school. Can't say that anymore. It's a positive and a negative when it comes to that area.

To lift the profile of our league, it's obviously positive. I mean, you have two teams in the preseason top 10, if I'm not wrong. Fact check me on that. In some polls they're both in the preseason top 10, added to a league that already has had the last how many national champions, what other tidbit you want to pull out.

The negative side is it makes our job harder. There's no way around it. They are regional. They are about the same distance to Tulsa -- or Oklahoma is about the same distance to Tulsa as I am. I used to have that advantage. I could say, Well, we're in the SEC, they're not. Now that's gone. I've had to reprint some mail-outs, do a little bit extra work when it comes to that.

Particularly with them, because of the people that are the head coaches there for me, I am just excited for it. Obviously my relationship with Coach Schaefer can be traced back to our days with Coach Blair together. We have way too many stories on each other we're not going to share publicly, I promise you. But we go way, way back.

With Jenny, we've shared some common staff members. We've come up through this about the same time as head coaches. We've been on a lot of committees together.

Somebody that I have an unbelievable amount of respect for.

Although I know it makes the job harder, it makes me want to get up and get running a little faster in the morning because I know there's two more people that have unbelievable success as coaches and at programs that speak for themselves.

Q. Vic Schaefer said earlier today that the majority of the coaches are adamantly opposed moving off the 16-game league schedule. What is your feeling on that?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: I agree. We've talked in the room. I think the 16 allows us to absorb each other within the league. I think a key point to put out as well, may not have got as much publicity, the women's committee took away league record as an NCAA tournament criteria. That was something else we pushed for. I've always felt like a 6-10 team in our league is just as good as some other leagues that might not be upside down.

That criteria no longer exists. So you put those two pieces together, I think 16 for us works. Another reason I think it works is because the coaches have gone out and filled their non-conference schedules with quality opponents. That raises everybody up. That gets the last two teams in. If we get eight in, that eighth team got in because of what the top seven did.

Hopefully with the increase in at-large bids for the P4s, maybe we're up to 10. That's why I say somebody with a double-digit is going to get in. I think it's important to stay there.

Equally as important that every coach goes out and takes advantage of that formula, raises those ships up by what they do with their non-conference schedule.

I've been a voice of that. I've done some research on it and shared that with other coaches and within the room. But we as the coaches have to go out and execute it; otherwise, it doesn't work. Otherwise, we should probably go to 18 or 20 or whatever else. As long as we keep doing it, keep multiple teams in the tournament, succeeding in the tournament, I think it creates for us an opportunity to get more teams in and improve our seeds.

Q. Defensive mentality this year, what is that?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: New. It's new for us, isn't it (smiling)? An offensive-minded thing, where we're at, what we're known for. Always thought defense was important, don't get me wrong. This year for us to be able to compete in

our non-conference schedule, our defense needs to be mid-season form.

When we built the schedule, we weren't anticipating some people to leave the program that we did when we built the schedule a year and a half, two years ago. We're opening with Fairfield. Some people have called me and said, Have you lost your damn mind opening with Fairfield with a new team? Well, I didn't have a new team when we scheduled it. So yeah, a little bit out of the mind. Fairfield is a team that won 30 games last year. It will be our first game to put on the uniforms on.

I think our defense has to be at the forefront of what we have to do. I think our offense will come along. I definitely think if the defense isn't there to start, we're not going to be able to build that offensive mentality into the SEC when we need it to be good.

We've kind of flipped it around. Again, I've had to adapt over the years. This is one sign that we're actually doing some adaptation. We're going to make sure Coach Schaefer has -- Todd Schaefer, that Todd has between 15 to 20 minutes extra every practice to focus on defense that used to be allotted to shooting or offensive work.

I hope that we see some evidence of that when we get on the court. I think the way preseason practices have gone, our defense is certainly ahead of our offense.

Q. We know Izzy is a scorer. Who are some others on the team that you think can pick up some scoring?

MIKE NEIGHBORS: I mean, Carly Keats was on her way to having an unbelievable end of the year last year until she got concussion, elbow to the face in friendly fire from a teammate. She had to play with a mask. We didn't like our masks over our face. You can imagine having one over your eyes and nose playing basketball. So we are really going to rely on her.

We brought Kiki Smith in from Hutch junior college that won the national championship. She was National Junior College Player of the Year. Shot a very high percentage from the field. We'll count there.

I also think you'll see an even distribution from everybody that does play. Obviously Izzy is going to have it in her hands a lot. The amount of misinformation she gives to an opponent is staggering. We have more clips of her crossing up our men's practice team to the floor already in 19 practices than we've had in our last six or seven years of other players. She is very deceptive. You think you have her in front of you, the next thing you know she's by you.

I credit Makayla Daniels for a lot. She came after we played them last year. Coach, of all the people I've guarded, she's one of the hardest kids I've had to guard because of that deception and the misdirection in her basketball IQ.

I am anxious to see how it translates. She started at Missouri. She understands the SEC. I think she built a lot of confidence with what they gave her at Arkansas State. That staff did a good job of putting the ball in her hands, letting her make plays. She's earned our confidence -- players, teammates, coaches. Now that she's earned that confidence, she'll have our support behind her as well.

It will be spread out, but I would look for the people we mentioned.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach.

MIKE NEIGHBORS: You got it. Thank y'all for covering women's basketball.

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