

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



not just the success on the court, the Sweet 16 run. I think our objective was to build a program that can sustain, not be a one-hit wonder in Mississippi.

A lot of positives right now, a lot of optimism, momentum right now. Certainly building off what the other sports are doing on campus. What Lane is doing in football is real, and our program, we benefit from that.

Any questions today? Glad to be here with you guys.

Q. Travis Perry was one of your obvious transfer acquisitions. What did you see from him that you thought he would be a good fit for your program? What will his role be on this team?

CHRIS BEARD: We recruited Travis. He's one of the first prospects I talked to literally a couple days after getting the Ole Miss job a couple years ago.

On the entry level of our relationship, had great respect for Travis. Son of a coach. Not only a coach, a championship coach. His dad is a great basketball mind, somebody I've always enjoyed talking basketball with. Comes from a sports family with mom and sisters and a younger brother.

Obviously the accolades Travis won in high school, winning a state championship at a school that had never done that before.

Obviously had to coach against Travis last year in the SEC. Thought he had a good year. A lot of times people associate a good year as a freshman in college basketball is the one-and-done guy. Travis was a handful of freshmen, along with guys like Klafke on our team, that was really in the rotation for Kentucky all year.

Currently Travis is doing well. I'm on the record, I'll never get tired of saying it, in my personal opinion, I can only speak for myself, Travis is more than a shooter. A shooter does not define what he can do on the court today and certainly what he will be able to do as he continues to grow as a player. Still a young sophomore in our league. We have a major impact role for Travis. We need him to have the best year he's ever had playing basketball for our team

THE MODERATOR: We welcome to the podium Chris Beard, head coach at Ole Miss.

CHRIS BEARD: Exciting time of the year for all of us involved in college basketball. No doubt a lot of optimism in Oxford, Mississippi. This will be our third Ole Miss team. 16 players currently on the roster, four returners. My Crockett Junior High math here, that means we have 12 new players. Three freshmen in that 12. Eight transfers, Ilias coming over internationally from France. Not really a freshman, not really a transfer, but those 16 players.

I think like most teams we're still trying to discover what our identity can be or needs to be. I think it's safe to say that depth could be a real ally of our team this year. Of those 16 players, we literally have 13 or 14 guys that are in play here for our first scrimmages and exhibition games coming up.

Really proud of what we've built in Oxford in a short time period. Emphasis on 'we'. Probably the biggest part of that was our past players.

Last year having arguably the best or one of the best seasons in Ole Miss basketball history, I'll just forever be grateful and appreciative of our seniors last year. All those guys are doing really well in terms of their pro basketball starts.

I think last year's team, just want to recognize, 'cause now we have a new opportunity in year three because of what those guys did.

I think the success on the court is also bleeding into the program. We have an all-time-high season tickets sold as of today. Still weeks before the season. Last year I think we had three of the top four crowds in Ole Miss basketball history in terms of attendance. We're regularly selling out games now. It's hard to get a ticket in Oxford. Again, it's



to do what we all would like to do in Oxford.

Q. Who are some of the other coaches that you like to maybe sit down and pick their brain and try to get new ideas for your program?

CHRIS BEARD: Great question. I think we all have mentors in college basketball. We all have people that we respect and value their opinion.

Just off the top of the list, Coach Pitino is a friend. I don't use that word lightly. He's somebody I have great respect for. He spent time with our teams. I've spent time with his teams. He's somebody definitely I can lean on for basketball decisions, among many others.

Q. Could you tell me about what you've learned about AJ as a person since he came into the program, what you're expecting from him?

CHRIS BEARD: I believe in AJ Storr. Not to put all the pressure of the world on his shoulders. Truth-telling program. I think AJ has a chance to reestablish himself as one of the best players in college basketball.

Been pleased this summer that there's been some stories on AJ, even some national coverage, that sets the facts right, accurately.

AJ went to seven, eight schools in seven or eight years. I really respect the media members that will actually take the time to study it and do the work. You'll quickly understand that one of the AJ's high schools shut down. Another one was in COVID, shut down. AJ went to play for his local high school team his junior year, had a great year.

Then had the opportunity to go to a national brand prep school, the same decision that 99 out of 100 student-athletes do.

In college he was established at St. John's, but they had a coaching change. That's a part of this business. We all understand that. Had great success at Wisconsin. I don't want to speak for AJ, but like everybody in our country, you listen when opportunities are presented. I think going to play for Bill Self is obviously not a bad decision.

Yes, AJ has been to a lot of schools. If you take the time and get the facts, you'll understand that he's never ran from anything. He's a great teammate. He's a great person. Not good, but great.

I believe in AJ. It's obviously a reset year for AJ. He knows that, we know that. We're proud to have him in Oxford. We're proud, along with his teammates, to give

him the opportunity to write the final chapters of his college career in a winning way.

Q. Have any guys really stood out to you in practice so far, especially on offense scoring-wise?

CHRIS BEARD: That's one of the real topics in our program right now. There's really two sides to the coin. On one side I can present a positive narrative that we have a lot of competition in practice. Again, I've never entered the season quite in this manner. We play our first closed-door scrimmage on Saturday.

Our 16-man roster, we literally have 14 guys in play. This is a good thing from a coaching standpoint in terms of competitiveness.

Depth. If you're going to win six games in three weekends, which is our goal, in late March and early April, you have to have depth in numbers to do that.

On the other side of the coin, we have to make sure the culture is defended. We got to make sure that unselfishness remains kind of the pillar of everything we do. There's going to be some tough moments for every player on our roster. As a competitor, you want to play more. But depending on time, score and game, we'll have to have a lot of unselfishness in our program, including our veteran players.

I would definitely say that depth is the first way I would describe this year's team.

Q. A lot of you guys with JUCO backgrounds are a little more accustomed to building a roster quickly. From a competitive equity standpoint, how difficult is it when you have a team like yours that's still playing when the portal opens?

CHRIS BEARD: That's another question that coaches can debate. Do we want to expand the NCAA tournament or keep it the same.

I think the portal opened this year, if I'm not mistaken, the Monday of the Sweet 16, so there's 16 teams standing. I don't think any of those 16 teams should really be complaining about still playing, so...

I thought that that was, in my personal opinion, about right. You don't want to start it too early and kind of inconvenience the teams that made the NCAA tournament. But you got to open it at some point.

We're a program that doesn't spend a lot of time talking about what we can't control. We try to spend a lot of time



talking about how can we win, how can we attack, be successful in the current landscape of college basketball.

There's a lot going on with our game. Again, not to have a "Ted Lasso" Captain Positive all the time, but I'm not one of those guys that thinks a lot about all the things in our game that are challenging. I still think it's the best game. I think March Madness is sacred. I think college basketball is the best game. It educates players, rallies communities and states. It takes over the whole world come March.

We don't spend a lot of time thinking about anything other than, hey, this is the rule, how do we get it done. Was it a challenge playing when the portal opened? Yes. But we have large coaching staffs.

If anybody has some gripes around here, talk to Division II coaches that only have one assistant, some of the low major guys that have three or four guys on the staff.

At our level, if any coach gets up here and bitches, woe is me, c'mon, man, we have 12, 15 guys on our staff.

Q. You mentioned AJ. Obviously we saw how good he was at Wisconsin. How do you get a guy like that back to playing to his potential and his ceiling?

CHRIS BEARD: I would say he was pretty damn good at Kansas, too. When you get seven or eight points in 15 minutes, that's adequate scoring. If somebody has a player for me today that can average seven points in 15 minutes, I'll do backflips out of here.

I understand the question, it's a real question.

AJ's just got to reset. I think the first thing is he's got to stay confident. That's something that me and him talked about in the recruiting process, on the phone calls and Zooms. The very first day he got to Oxford before he dropped stuff off at his apartment, we talked about that.

We've spent zero time having to deal with that. AJ showed up to Oxford confident. There hasn't been one moment where I thought I could help him as a coach reminding him who he is. He knows who he is.

From a basketball standpoint, one of the great things about AJ is his humility. I'll put this on my three daughters. AJ has never said one thing that is grayline, excuse or negative, based on anywhere he's ever been. Him and I talk a lot about the things that he learned from Kansas and from Wisconsin and from St. John's.

He's got to stay confident. He is. Now it's just getting back to playing championship basketball, embracing each

possession. I think when AJ is aggressive, AJ is very good. When AJ defers, he can become average very quickly, just like myself or any of us in this room.

Sometimes when AJ defers, it's not in terms of being lazy or selfish, it's sometimes he's such a good person, a good teammate, that he'll just kind of defer a little bit.

On this year's team at Ole Miss, we need AJ to be aggressive. We need him to be aggressive on the bench talking to his teammates. We need him to be aggressive in between plays, huddling up his teammates. Certainly every possession he needs to impact that possession, no different than our other veteran players as well.

Q. Coach, you look fantastic. Anyone that watched you guys play last year saw the potential that Malik Dia has. Seems to be moments where he didn't know should I shoot it more, my back to the basket. How have you coached him up this year to figure out what he needs to bring consistently?

CHRIS BEARD: First of all, I appreciate you recognizing my dress code today. I don't get that much. I'm the fourth best dressed person in my four-member family, behind the girls.

Obviously when you coach with Coach Yo, we all understand her fashion game, elite. I'm actually a little bit insecure here. Here is what happened this morning. Same suit I have worn the last two years at SEC media days. Thought I grabbed a dress shirt, but I didn't. This is one of those casual shirts. I did a Jeff Goodman type guy wears with the jeans and the sneakers.

The collar has been coming up all morning. I'm really concerned about this look right here, but I appreciate you saying I look decent up here.

Malik Dia, I'm on the record, never get tired of talking about it. I believe in Malik Dia because he cares. Malik Dia doesn't love basketball, he's addicted to it. Second only to his faith and family, this is what this guy does.

He sleeps about eight hours a day, 24 minus eight, getting back to my Crockett Junior High math, what is that? What is 24 minus eight?

THE MODERATOR: 16.

CHRIS BEARD: 16. Where did you go to school (laughter)?

He has 16 hours in the day. He just pours almost every single minute into basketball. He gets prepared. That's



why I believe in him. I appreciate Dia because he allows me to coach him as hard as any player I've ever coached.

Why do I do that? Dia has high expectations. He believes he can play in the NBA. That's a strong statement. I do, too. Neither one of us thinks it's going to be easy, but that's where our compass starts every day.

What Dia has to do to kind of elevate his game is he has to learn consistency. I think we can make a highlight tape on YouTube, and I can argue Dia is a First Team All-Conference SEC guy based on the highlight tape. He's got to get consistent.

Last year we studied every minute and every possession he played this off-season. Conditioning was a factor last year. I think he did a great job getting himself in elite shape this off-season, not only running up and down the streets and the mountains of Oxford -- yes, Oxford has hills -- diet, nutrition, sleep, mental toughness. I believe if Dia gets consistent, he really could be one of the best players in the SEC.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for your time.

CHRIS BEARD: Thank you.

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