

# Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

## Florida Gators

## Coach Kelly Rae Finley

### Women's Media Day Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We welcome Kelly Rae Finley from the University of Florida to the stage.

KELLY RAE FINLEY: Good morning, everybody. Or should I say good afternoon.

First of all, thank you all for being here and for your coverage of women's basketball in the SEC.

In regards to the Gators and our team, we believe it's not only a new season ahead of us, but a new opportunity to write this next chapter the way that we feel is best suited for Florida women's basketball.

We're looking forward to the season ahead. We return Laila Reynolds, Liv McGill and Me'Arah O'Neal as a core group, right? With the addition of the change in the junior college rules, we were able to return Alexia Dizeko, as well, which was a tremendous asset to us this off-season.

Our non-conference should be something very fun to follow, fun to watch. Many, many home games for Gators fans everywhere.

But this off-season was a bit untraditional for us in that we have many international student-athletes, all who had the opportunity to compete with their national teams. So we feel refreshed, ready for the season ahead, and most definitely are looking forward to you all covering us and seeing us on the court here shortly.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach. If you have a question...

**Q. Having the international players, them being able to play for their national teams, do you think that will be beneficial, not just within non-conference play, but as you get through the trajectory of your schedule, especially coming from last season where you were in**

**games and things separated going down the stretch?**

KELLY RAE FINLEY: Yeah, absolutely. We're looking to build on last season. Like I said, in this new season, right, start off really strong. The international competition only amplifies what we feel like we're going to be able to do in the non-conference.

Playing for your national team is undoubtedly a huge honor. Many could look at it as though your whole team wasn't together all summer. For us, we're refreshed, renewed, we're connected and we're really focused on that common mission and that common goal that we have.

It was tremendous. All three of our freshmen -- Cat, Nyadie and Mills -- have a lot of experience on the international level, which should serve us well come conference season.

**Q. You were in a lot of games, and sometimes turnovers were just -- I think you had a hundred more turnovers than your opponents.**

KELLY RAE FINLEY: Yeah.

**Q. What do you think of this team, experience of these games, that will make that better this year?**

KELLY RAE FINLEY: You said it (smiling). I think experience is the greatest teacher, right? We have a core group of student-athletes that are committed to growing and learning. Both Liv and Laila had enormous experience live in-game. They're diligent workers, students of the game. I'm excited to see that improvement over the course of this season.

**Q. We got a chance to see Liv McGill grow up throughout the season. What is the next level in her trajectory this season.**

KELLY RAE FINLEY: She's a big-time player. She would tell you she's been working tirelessly on her leadership, her connection with each individual player, understanding what makes them tick, and how to drive a program forward, right? We have standards that we want to reach and

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expectations.

For Liv, she's unconventional in that she is old school in her approach. She's a worker. As a coach, you couldn't be more proud of somebody that wants to earn everything that they receive.

Her and Laila, Me'Arah, being able to play off of each other, but that experience, like you said, the SEC is a fast league. It's arguably, not so arguably, the best league in women's basketball. So to be a freshman with that much experience that she had last season, using that, growing from the film, studying that in the off-season, you're going to see huge growth this season.

**Q. How do you translate the success you've had in the SEC tournament into more consistency during the regular season?**

KELLY RAE FINLEY: I appreciate and love that question because that's the truth. We need to peak earlier. You want to peak in March. We've talked with our team, we've really evaluated this off-season where we need to grow sooner as a program. Part of that is in the consistency of our players.

Sometimes you have lucky breaks, sometimes you don't. We had two key contributors last season. Laila Reynolds, her first game back was her fifth game of the season coming off of hip surgery.

Things like that. Having consistency in our training. Being able to evaluate where those gaps and holes were for us this off-season, rebounding, defense, where our scoring is coming from, transition defense, ball screen defense, especially in our league, and being able to address those things earlier, have better chemistry early.

That's been huge for us in terms of how we connect both on and off the court to elevate our play.

**Q. When your men's team wins the national championship, is there any extra bounce for the women's program shining a light on basketball at the University of Florida in general?**

KELLY RAE FINLEY: Great question.

Absolutely. Basketball is flourishing at the University of Florida for both the men and the women. The excitement is a buzz. You can hear it in Gator Nation.

I'll share one story. Walter Clayton Jr. is a tremendous teammate. We share a complex, a facility with the men. We practice relatively the same time. We spend a lot of

time together, both coaches and players.

It's a unique environment, where many times we talk about you are the company you keep. I can't tell you guys how many times Walter would walk into that training room and say, When we win, we all win. When you eat, we all eat. Right?

For men's basketball to be uplifting the women's basketball team, and women's basketball team to subsequently be uplifting the men's team, is just truly special.

You're spot on with that. Basketball buzz is at an all-time high on campus, and we're looking forward to the season ahead.

**Q. When your last name is O'Neal, the expectations on you, even if you're playing checkers, are probably pretty intense. Talk about what you've seen from her. You brought her here, so...**

KELLY RAE FINLEY: Man, I'm grateful that you asked that question. I hoped somebody would.

Me'Arah has grown more than anybody on our roster in many, many ways. As a coach, to understand your student-athletes is a tremendous part in initiating that progress, right?

So for Me'Arah, the trust was at an all-time high. Her buy-in to her process, her timeline, her ability to quiet the outside noise, is elite. You all will be very pleased with what you see on the court with her this season and her growth everywhere. The speed of the game, the pace of the game. She's really worked tirelessly on her overall strengths, her conditioning.

She might be one of the best skilled bigs in the country in terms of her ability to shoot the three, go inside, outside, rebound, initiate the offense, things of that nature. She's now more ready than she was last year.

To be as young as she was, to be bought into that process, is incredibly unique.

**Q. Obviously every season is different. What did you learn about yourself the most after last season? What could fans expect differently about this year's team?**

KELLY RAE FINLEY: I'm probably the most critical of myself. I was raised by a coach. Coach's kids are sometimes just a little bit different, right?

The evaluation of what we needed to do differently as a staff in order to have us prepared earlier in the season is



going to be critical to our success this season.

Just evaluating defensive schemes, offensive schemes, who needs the ball when and where, combined with the experience that we now have that we didn't have.

But in talking to our team, we're still young. We have one senior. We're young and hungry. Us as a coaching staff, I feel like we've really improved this off-season, not only to be in those close ball games. That's SEC play. Every game comes down to one or two possessions. But the ability to execute down the stretch comes with composure, consistency, confidence and things of that nature.

**Q. Being a coach's kid, growing up in that world, we all know for some reason kids, we struggle with receiving instruction from our parents, but was there some type of realization as a head coach where you're like, Dang, I now get it?**

KELLY RAE FINLEY: Oh, absolutely (smiling).

I remember growing up, my dad saying, he was diligent, Go to the X, right?

You'd be a step off of the X on the court. I'm on the X.

No, you're not on the X, right?

I find in myself, in my teaching, in our teaching as a staff, those little details that matter. When I was 16, 17, 18, I'm like, What's the difference of two feet?

Oh, boy, the difference in two feet is enormous, right?

Just the discipline that's required to be prepared in order to have our team prepared, I think that's something that sometimes is missed. The sacrifice in what it takes to be a coach, to mentor and help grow young women, to be strong and confident and powerful both in business and in life, I think that's the ultimate goal for us all as coaches.

But yeah, I definitely have had that epiphany.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you for your time today.

KELLY RAE FINLEY: Thank you. Go Gators.

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