

Atlantic Coast Conference Basketball Tipoff Media Day

Tuesday, October 8, 2024

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets

Coach Nell Fortner

Tonie Morgan

Kara Dunn

Women's Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Happy to have Georgia Tech, women's basketball team here with us. Head coach Nell Fortner, Kara Dunn on the end, and Tonie Morgan.

Nell Fortner, it is always a pleasure to be here with you. You're returning seven returners, but you have a great mix of transfers and newcomers. How has the melding process gone for you so far?

NELL FORTNER: It's gone well. These seven returners, they have really good experience. They have a great hunger in their belly to be successful, and now we've added these five, four freshmen and one grad transfer, that are really high-level players.

It's been a really great mixture of bringing them together as far as being competitive. Practices are highly competitive. That's made a big difference in how we can progress and move forward.

THE MODERATOR: Give us an early season kind of preview, style of play, how much things have changed, especially now that you are getting some veteran leadership.

NELL FORTNER: Yeah, definitely have veteran leadership. These two come back as all-conference performers. They're our leading scorers and rebounders. A lot is expected from them.

We also have a lot of versatility with them, so they can play multiple positions on the court. But our goal is to really push pace. Just like everybody's goal is it seems like now in the college game, push pace and defend hard.

Those are things that we're working on every day.



THE MODERATOR: I read somewhere where you know this team can score.

NELL FORTNER: Yeah.

THE MODERATOR: But for you guys to take that next step, it's the defense that they have. Who is that player for you that you know you have to lead your defense?

NELL FORTNER: She's sitting right here to my left,

Tonie Morgan is a phenomenal athlete who has the ability to be a lockdown defender when she wants to be.

It's always -- you know, defense is hard. You have to want to get out there and really play it, and it's hard. I think that's something that Tonie has learned through -- now she's a third-year player, so she's understanding that better.

As she continues to grow her game, people can just feed off of it. That's what's really cool. Kara, a multi-faceted defender where, she can defend different positions on the floor that give us a lot of opportunities to play different line-ups, and that's a cool thing to be able to do.

THE MODERATOR: Tonie, she just threw the gauntlet down on you.

TONIE MORGAN: She did.

THE MODERATOR: You're a junior now. Even as a freshman and sophomore, you were required to do a lot of scoring. How have you grown into this role.

TONIE MORGAN: Learn to accept it. I want to do anything I can to help us win because that's what we need to do this year, so I'm excited for this season.

THE MODERATOR: Kara, coach's kid, how has that helped you, especially now that you are an upper classman in this program to understand what your head coach wants and how you can kind of be a mouth piece on the floor.

KARA DUNN: I think it more so goes into I feel like I know

what my coaches expect from me just because from my mom I have been able to know what she's thinking behind the scenes about the team, see team chemistry before it happens, all of that.

So I think that that's really been helping me.

And like Tonie said, anything I can do to help us win, anything to get is to the tournament this year.

Q. (Off microphone). With the four freshmen coming in and the transfers coming in, you guys have solidified into this program. How do you get the chemistry going?

KARA DUNN: Yeah, I don't think it was hard at all. Our four freshmen, all of them have such different personalities, but in the best possible way. They mesh with us really quickly on and off the court.

I'm really excited for y'all to see them. I'm excited to play with them when it really matters. Yeah, it's going to be really good this year.

TONIE MORGAN: Yes, what Kara said. It was very easy to deepen this bond with this team. It was a great bunch. We love each other. We love to be together. We hang out often, and it's just great to get to know them.

Q. My question is for Coach. A lot of great guards across this league. You've got two of them with you on stage there. How do you feel like your squad matches up with the rest of the conference?

NELL FORTNER: Wow, this conference is so, so tough. It is extremely strong. People got a lot better. Several teams got better through the transfer portal. Several people just got better because of their returning players with great experience now.

There is just not ever going to be any kind of an off night in this conference, but I like how we match up. I like the things that this team is capable of doing are. It's just a matter of being extremely confident in that and continuing to get better defensively in what we're doing because you have to compete on the defensive end of the floor every time you get on the floor.

You've got to lay your will onto somebody on that end of the floor, but this conference, again, is so, so strong. I think that at the end of the day I think it's going to be a night in and night out thing where anybody can beat anybody at any point in time, and that's the really exciting thing about the conference. It's the really mind-blowing thing when you're a coach trying to figure out how to

continue to get your -- prepare your team and have them constantly ready night in and night out.

Q. A quick follow-up to that. Speaking of any given night, you all took NC State down to the wire last year in a very close game. What does Coach Moore and that program do that has such a great back court and is so deep as well?

NELL FORTNER: I tell you what, he has some really nice players, no doubt about it. That game, every time we go there it seems like we go down to the wire with him. We beat him there one year. They were ranked, I don't know, top four in the country. We beat them. I think that was my first year at Georgia tech. It was a phenomenal game. Really fun. Last year Kara hits two crazy shots to take us into overtime.

There's something about that gym. This happens in sports, right? There's something about some atmospheres that just really are difference-making for your team. It seems to be NC State is that for us.

Do we play them there this year?

Q. (Off microphone).

NELL FORTNER: That's okay. We'll play them anywhere.

THE MODERATOR: You beat them at home two years ago.

NELL FORTNER: There you go.

THE MODERATOR: Now, you brought up the three new additions in the league. How did you and your staff approach that in the offseason or have you in terms of getting ready knowing that it's a gauntlet once ACC season starts?

NELL FORTNER: Let me tell you something, I haven't even thought about it. I'm not kidding. Meshing this new class, these five players, that's the most important thing. Getting them here, getting them acclimated, getting them on board. That's the most important thing to me.

I really don't as a coach look too far ahead in the future. I look right here with what my day-to-day activities need to be, my studying needs to be. That is to get each one of these players in the best position possible to win ball games, and we'll deal with Cal, Stanford, and SMU later on down the line.

THE MODERATOR: Tonie, what have you added to your game going now into your junior year?

TONIE MORGAN: I would say shooting, of course, but my coach would say maturity. She's congratulated me in practice and given me flowers, so it's nice to hear it from you, Coach Nell.

Yeah, I would say stepping up and becoming a leader that this team need and that I wanted to be for myself, but also, of course, on court things, so that's what I say.

THE MODERATOR: Kara, both you and Tonie both got thrown into the fire as freshmen and played a lot of minutes. Nell has mentioned your freshman class. What advice have you shared from your own experiences?

KARA DUNN: I think more so I've taken an approach of wanting to give them what I didn't really have. I want to make sure that I always -- that they know that I have confidence in them and for them to know that I have their back no matter what.

But I think that with this freshman class, they know that they have us, and I think that that also helps them going into every single practice. They know that no matter if they have a good day or a bad day, we're always going to be there for them.

We know what they can do, and I think us playing together really meshes well.

THE MODERATOR: Now I'm going to ask this as the coach. Give me a couple of areas that you know are strengths for this ball club and then a couple of those areas that are keeping you up at night that your players need to hear right now.

NELL FORTNER: The one thing that really I think pleases me on a daily basis is how competitive this team has become. That's something we haven't had in the past. Every day they compete so hard against each other, and that is incredibly important to continue to help players grow their own personal game and to continue to grow as a team. That they fight together on the floor to get things done.

No matter what combination, no matter who has on what jersey, whatever, that they are still going after each other. They're still trying to make each other better. They're still trying to win every drill that they are in, and it's been difference-making.

I'm sure they can even speak to that because this is different for them in their junior year to have that kind of competition on a daily basis.

This freshman class is very talented and very hungry. They come in here very hungry to compete for their time on the floor, and it's made practices a pure joy to go to. I really enjoy it.

Now, where do we need to get better? We have to get better -- you're going to -- I'm a broken record, but defensively that has to happen for us. We were able to score points last year, score enough points at times to win more ball games, but we couldn't stop people.

It wasn't important enough to us as a collective whole. Now this year it has to be the primary, most important thing as a collective whole because we have scorers. We've got to stop people.

Q. Coach, you've been in this game for a long time, one of the most successful coaches.

NELL FORTNER: I'm hearing that a lot. I mean, goodness gracious.

Q. I'm sorry. My question for you is, one, how has this game changed for you in all your years of coaching? Number two, other than these two stand-outs right here, one player that stood out to me through research and watching ya'll last year, Kayla Blackshear. Can you talk about her growth over the years?

NELL FORTNER: Yeah, no question these two have really continued to grow their game and stayed dedicated to trying to get better day in and day out and through the summers. I think that's incredibly important for all players to understand.

I say this. The fall does not lie about the summer. So when you get going up and down in the fall, we know exactly what you did in the summer quickly. So that's a really important lesson for players to learn because you've got to work on your game in the summertime.

These two have done that, and we're seeing that on a daily basis.

Kayla Blackshear still has her speed, her quickness, her ability to help us on the boards, her ability to quickly put the ball on the floor, get around people as an undersized four, five player.

Last year she played the five for us. She's not going to have to do that this year. We have a little more depth in that area. Although she could, and she might because she's versatile in that regard.

But she's someone who has a lot of experience, and that

becomes really, really important when you get down into the nitty gritty of a conference season. Experience, been there, done that, I know what to do here. That's what Kayla can bring to us.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, this goes for both of you, Kara and Tonie. Give me one teammate that probably right now no one knows about, but probably about two or three weeks in people are going to start talking about.

KARA DUNN: Well, I'm not going to say that nobody knows about her, but the first person that comes to mind is Dani. Dani has shown every single practice, and I mean every single practice, who she is as a player. She's a scorer. She's a passer. She's a facilitator. She can do everything, and she's also a really good teammate.

So I think within the start of the season you all will definitely know her name.

TONIE MORGAN: I agree with that, but I'm going to go Chit-Chat. That's my homey right there. She's the other point guard on the team. She's very fast, quick, can defend 94 feet. Great person, great player. We love playing with her. So I think she's going to turn a lot of heads this season.

THE MODERATOR: The ACC talks about accomplishing greatness. Now, when I make that statement, what does that mean to you being head coach of Georgia Tech?

NELL FORTNER: Accomplishing greatness is just this league is extremely strong. And we're talking women's basketball here. There's 18 teams in this conference heading into this year. That's 18 strong teams that are going to compete day in and day out.

Accomplishing greatness in this league could be sending ten teams to the NCAA Tournament. Who knows? I don't know. You put 18 teams in a conference, you're going to have a lot of teams going to the tournament, and especially at the level that these teams are at. It's going to be really, really interesting.

To me, that's accomplishing greatness. The more teams you send to the tournament, the deeper they make runs in the tournament, that's accomplishing greatness.

THE MODERATOR: There's a lot of talk out there right now about how the women's game has grown, more eyeballs on it. You guys are growing through it right now. What does it mean to you to be a student-athlete right now in the ACC knowing more eyeballs are on you than ever before in our game?

KARA DUNN: I think it's a privilege. It's amazing to see. I don't think anybody right now in the world can say that they haven't paid somewhat of attention to women's basketball in the past couple of years. That's not something that people have been able to say in the past.

I think it's a great opportunity. It's really good for me and Tonie right now in college because I feel like college is really the hotspot right now, and it's spreading to the WNBA with Caitlin and Angel going up there.

So I feel like it's an amazing opportunity. I'm really grateful to be a part of it right now.

TONIE MORGAN: I think she hit it on the head. Just great to be a part of and being a college athlete in women's sports. I'm just looking forward to the future.

THE MODERATOR: Kara, Tonie, Coach, thank you so much for joining us today.

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