

Atlantic Coast Conference Basketball Tipoff Media Day

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Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

NC State Wolfpack Coach Wes Moore Saniya Rivers Aziaha James

Women's Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Happy to have NC State Wolfpack with us. Head coach Wes Moore, Aziaha James, and Saniya Rivers. Wes, I'm going to start with you. Last year at this time unranked. Picked eighth in the ACC. I think there's a lot of coaches that will not be picking you eighth again this season. Just give us what you thought the catalyst was for that Final Four run with such minimal expectations to start the year a year ago?

WES MOORE: Without a doubt, I think the key to our run was our chemistry. I think everyone really bought into the team-first mentality. Everyone was unselfish, actually enjoyed celebrating their teammates' success as much if not more than their own.

It just made for a great culture and just an unbelievable ride for sure.

THE MODERATOR: With two key pieces returning, can you kind of give us a quick preview of this upcoming season?

WES MOORE: Yeah, again, you mentioned last year. We were probably picked a little bit low. This year we might be picked a little bit high. I think everyone looks at our guards, especially these two and think, oh, wow, you know, NC State is going to be really, really good.

But we lost two really good players in River Baldwin and Mimi Collins, who are both playing overseas in Europe now professionally. Those are going to be big shoes to fill.

Again, when you have these two, Madison Hayes, Zoe Brooks, along with the freshmen that came in, we're definitely excited about the season.

But, again, we have a whole lot of work to do.

Q. You just mentioned a lot of key pieces coming back, two of them sitting right next to you. As far as the culture that was built over the course of last year, how important was that to have so many players back to maintain that and kind of pass it on to the younger players?

WES MOORE: Yeah, no doubt. These two are going to be a really important part of that. They know how much fun last year was. They know the success we had because of the culture and everybody buying in.

So I think they're going to be vocal, and they're going to get those points across. Hopefully, sometimes you have to have players kind of keep things together in the locker room and that sort of thing. I think these two will play a big part in that.

Yeah, we keep talking about it, and we talked about it last year. We started out unranked and next thing you know, you're in the top five in the country. You've got to keep reminding everybody to stay humble, stay hungry. That was kind of our motto last year. I think we'll keep that rolling.

Q. With all the hype around the end of how y'all finished, how do you as a coach and y'all as players prevent the outside noise and the distractions when it comes time to play on the court?

SANIYA RIVERS: I think like Coach mentioned just buying into our team. Obviously you can't win by yourself, so when everyone is bought in, it makes it easier to win big games. Obviously Coach has to be bought into us. We're bought into him, and we prepare ourselves well every game. Just buying in, recovery, everything that looks like on and off the court. That's an important factor.

AZIAHA JAMES: Definitely. Just the same thing we did last year. As you said, we was unranked last year and we didn't care what the media had to say.

We went to every game, gave 110% every game. So just keeping that same energy and intensity every step of the



way this season.

Q. You mentioned you lost -- a lot of key pieces back, but the two that are gone were big pieces in the front court with Baldwin and Collins. Can you break down how y'all are going about reloading that front court?

WES MOORE: It's still a work in progress as far as reloading the front court. I'll be honest with you. We have some question marks there. We've got to have some players step up. We may play four guards some with the talent that we have at that position.

Yeah, it's really too early to say, and we'll hopefully figure it out before November 5th when we tip it off.

Q. When you have question marks like that and with the bigs, how much does it help to have lengthy guards like Saniya or Madison Hayes to kind of help especially on the defensive end?

WES MOORE: No doubt. We're probably going to be playing four guards quite a bit. Heck, we may play five guards. I don't know yet, but you're right. With Saniya's length and athletic ability you can play her about anywhere on the floor.

We are definitely looking at a lot of different options. We want to get our best players on the court and then kind of adjust the system to fit that line-up.

Q. Saniya, defense wins championships, and that's one of your significant characteristics as a player. Can you talk about how the defensive output changes depending on the position because you play almost every position.

SANIYA RIVERS: It's definitely tough. That's when you have to be versatile. I feel like I take pride in being a versatile player because I'm very unselfish. I want to be able to put my team in a position to win so whatever I need to do to help contribute to the wins, that's what I'm going to do.

So if Coach needs me to control the team, then I'll play at point. If Coach wants to run five guards, then I'll go to the post and wall up with the post. I got to be a little stronger. It's a mentality switch as well.

Last year I played a lot of point guard. This year moving around, maybe playing three, four, five, I definitely have to switch my mentality. I think physically I'm there. You mentioned me being very long. I think that's a big factor, and I'm excited to play different positions this year because I do take pride in my defense.

THE MODERATOR: Aziaha, you're the veteran now. What have you added to your game this last season?

AZIAHA JAMES: Trying to be more vocal. Also in the locker room as well just making sure players just not getting upset when something happens or we maintain our focus or we're just buying into the little things, because the little things are always going to matter no matter what it is.

Q. Aziaha and Saniya, last year was y'all's first season as full-time starters. Just what was that like being full-time starters, obviously being two of the most relied upon players on the team?

AZIAHA JAMES: I've been here for four years and just the journey that I have been on, that felt so good. It just shows me all the work I put in. It really paid off.

SANIYA RIVERS: I'll piggyback off that. I think it was definitely well-deserved, well-earned. A starting spot is not something that's given to you. It's something that's earned.

It took us four years -- or three years to get here, and we're definitely looking forward to keeping our spot because anybody can take it at any given time. You just want to stay humble, stay hungry, and just grind and keep the spot.

Q. Obviously a lot of success with last season's Final Four run, but this is a new season. How much are y'all as leaders kind of stepping up and saying, hey, we have to -- this is a new season. We have to earn it. We can't just rest on the success of last season.

SANIYA RIVERS: I think everybody is excited about us going to the Final Four last year obviously. Our Fans, Wolfpack Nation is still talking about the Final Four, but it's a new season for us. We've been going for months now. We've been going since summer.

We had a little break. We got to enjoy it, but it's time to flip the page. Obviously we celebrate the wins. We celebrate going to Final Four, but it's time to turn the page at one point.

I feel like bringing our freshmen along or a transfer we have of who wasn't a part of that last year, we can't obviously put them on that stage that we were on last year, but we can tell them, hey, it was fun, it was hard to get there. We can tell them everything we need to do to get there.

They still won't know what it's like until they actually get there. So we're going to do our best to prepare them to get back there just so they can experience something we did

experience.

AZIAHA JAMES: Definitely. Just to piggyback off 'Niya, telling them it's hard. It's hard to get where we got last year, and people is not going -- teams are not going to come it a game like, oh, they've been to a Final Four, we're going to back down. They're going to be hungry for us. We have a big target on our back.

You always want to be better than the year you was before, so just maintaining that.

THE MODERATOR: Wes, many will argue this is the best women's basketball conference in the country, and you just added three more teams. For you and your staff, was there anything that you did this offseason to prepare for those three new teams or to prepare for the gauntlet that's coming up this season?

WES MOORE: Well, I think you're always preparing for the gauntlet. The reason the ACC is maybe the best conference in the country women's basketball-wise is because of the talent. We have so many great players in this league. Every night you're going to be going up against some of the best.

So I'm excited about adding Cal and Stanford and SMU.

Again, three great schools, great programs. I think it's kind of fun. We get to go to California. Maybe slide over to San Francisco on that trip. Then growing up in Dallas, I'm excited about going back to SMU as well.

Yeah, I think it's awesome. I'm looking forward to it.

Q. Saniya and Aziaha, obviously y'all had the opportunity to go to the draft or you could have transferred. What went into the decision to stay at NC State?

AZIAHA JAMES: Nobody want to leave Coach Moore now.

WES MOORE: What kind of question is that? My goodness. Security!

AZIAHA JAMES: No, we love this atmosphere. We wouldn't want to play for another team or another school. Just love and happiness over here. So yeah, that's why I stayed.

SANIYA RIVERS: I'll say the same. I love the team here. I love the coaching staff, love the fans. It's a very family atmosphere. Especially being from North Carolina, I'm very happy here. You know, back home, close to family. I

get to sneak home and get those home-cooked meals every once in a while. I love being here. I wouldn't want to transfer anywhere else.

WES MOORE: Then add our fans also. We came back from Portland at 3:00, 3:30 in the morning, and thousands of people there waiting to welcome us back. It's a pretty special fan base.

It's kind of fun being a rock star in Raleighwood.

SANIYA RIVERS: Yeah.

Q. Coach, first off, you have been in the game for a while, and you look at the growth from these ladies from all the years, including these two stars right up here. What does it mean to watch your players grow as team goes on? Then, secondly, what is the phrase "Tobacco Road, NC State, Carolina, Duke" mean to you?

WES MOORE: As far as the growth of the game, I'm just so happy for these players because they've been putting in the work and making sacrifices since they were small children, and now they're being recognized for it and on a big stage, whether it be in person. We sell out about all our games. Then we go to some great venues as well on the road where we have unbelievable crowds and on TV, on the air.

It's really an exciting time to be a women's basketball player at the college level and with all the things that now are out there for them. It's great to see them being rewarded and kind of reap the benefits of all they've done.

As far as Tobacco Road, it's great. I mean, you've got us, Duke, Carolina. We're 30 minutes apart from both of them. I think they're probably about 15 minutes apart from each other.

Just makes it fun, you know. Again, they all played against a lot of them when they were playing travel ball or with them. Again, wherever you go, you have got your Carolina fans, your Duke fans, and then you got The Wolfpack fans, the rabid fans. It's a fun deal. I enjoy being a part of it.

Q. You talked about Hayes coming back. She was doing a lot of rim running, offensive rebounding for you last year. Is that something you envision for her? Is that something you envision for her? Is that something maybe Saniya can add to her game as well should Hayes take a breather and she is filling in that role?

WES MOORE: Who did you say initially?



... when all is said, we're done.®

Q. Hayes, the rim run.

WES MOORE: Madison Hayes. Again, I think you got to keep in mind these two, and like I said, Madison Hayes, all three of them have been in the program now for at least a few years.

You know, Saniya and Madison got led astray initially and the Lord brought them back where they belong. Aziaha has been with me the whole time, baby, thataway.

No, Madison Hayes, you're right. That's going to be a big part. Especially if we're playing four guards. She sometimes will be that kind of forward position, and we want her to use that speed to beat people down the court.

Obviously these two can push tempo. Saniya is so long and athletic getting to the rim, and Aziaha will get out and run, push tempo.

It's going to be fun, and we've got to keep that in mind. We have to make sure that that's an emphasis because we need to take advantage of these great guards.

THE MODERATOR: Ladies, give me a teammate who right now maybe your fans don't know much about, but based on what she's shown so far in practice you think she's going to make a major impact for you guys this season.

SANIYA RIVERS: I feel like everyone knows Zam, so I'm going to go Tilda. She's from Sweden. She's so sweet on and off the court, so we have to get her -- yeah, she's sweet on the court. We have to get her --

WES MOORE: We need to get her unsweet on the court.

SANIYA RIVERS: Yeah, We need to get her this dog mentality. She's a three-level scorer to the bucket, mid-range range pull-up threes. She's going to be big for us whether we need her to play the wing spot or bang with the fives down low.

She's also unselfish, so she's going to do whatever she can to help contribute to the wins.

AZIAHA JAMES: I wouldn't say y'all don't know her, but I feel like Zoe's name can be out there more. Zoe's game has been going unnoticed a lot of times, and she contributes to the team so many ways.

This year is going to be her breakout year. I feel it.

WES MOORE: I agree with that. Zoe, again, she's that --

you know, bringing in the four guards, she's one of the four basketeers if you want to call them. She's an important part of our tempo. I thought she had an unbelievable freshman year.

Now you add her to the three senior guards, it's a special group.

THE MODERATOR: Well, thank you, rock stars of Raleighwood for sharing this morning with us.

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