

# Atlantic Coast Conference Basketball Tipoff Media Day

Wednesday, October 9, 2024

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

## Cal Bears

## Coach Charmin Smith

## Marta Suarez

## Michelle Oniyah

## Ionna Krimili

## Women's Press Conference



Raising the Bar Tournament. Can you explain what that stands for and just the pride that you take in that event?

CHARMIN SMITH: So after the summer, the murder of George Floyd, I thought there was a lot of conversation surrounding social justice issues that I saw really disappear after the season and the bubble ended and people went back to their lives. COVID was subsiding a bit, and I didn't like that. I didn't think we resolved many things in our country, and I felt like we needed to continue the conversation surrounding social justice.

So I thought about what could we do. In our program we rebranded our tournament to the Raising the Bar Invitational with the bar standing for basketball, activism, and representation. In our sport, we have over 45% of our student-athletes that are women of color, yet approximately 17% or so of the head coaches are women of color. So I wanted to highlight that issue.

It's been really great. It's four black female coaches. We have all black female officiating crew. Looking forward to continuing that.

I want it to be something where people talk about Raising the Bar Invitational the way you talk about the Jimmy V Classic or Maui Invitational. We have to keep the basketball improving, but we're really excited about it.

THE MODERATOR: Marta, can you speak about how important it is for you to play for a head coach like Charmin that doesn't just talk about, but she walks what this generation needs in terms of that guidance and support?

MARTA SUAREZ: 100%. She mentions that a lot, how you do one thing is how you do everything. She cares about how she carries herself and leads through example. We see it every day. Even through her Muay Thai. She'll show us her workouts. She has taken us to her workouts before.

We know she puts in the work. Yesterday we just got here from -- we landed here in North Carolina where everybody from the crew went to work out, went to the gym to the YMCA. We all got a sweat in.

THE MODERATOR: Can you explain the shoe game that we have going on right now?

CHARMIN SMITH: We are all repping our J Casos (phonetic). These were all designed by Jayda Noble. Player on our team. She's extremely talented. She's been making shoes for J Lloyd and countless WNBA prayers.

We thought we for our first ACC media day we had to show out for her and rock our Jay Casos. We're super excited about them.

THE MODERATOR: No one is going to pay attention to what you look like now because of the shoes. Charmin, I think just to start off with, you made a big jump last year; and now transitioning into the ACC. Can you talk about how important last year's success is as you get ready to come into the ACC?

CHARMIN SMITH: Yeah, we did a great job. We had the most wins in my tenure. Qualified for postseason play. It was a successful season, but no one here is satisfied with that. We know that we want more. So we talk a lot about leveling up, right? Not just being happy with, oh, we qualified for postseason play. No, we want the NCAA Tournament.

What better place to allow us to have the opportunity to showcase who we are and qualify for the NCAA Tournament than playing in the ACC, right? The ACC has had the most teams in the tournament in the past couple of years. We're looking forward to adding to that number. That's the goal.

THE MODERATOR: You have started with what you call



Then we went to dinner and we had some fun. It's good to have a coach that, first of all, she was a player, so she understands the grind. She understands what it takes, and then that she keeps doing it and she keeps showing up for us.

THE MODERATOR: Speaking of Muay Thai, can you tell the audience, first of all, exactly what, but how has that helped you as a coach?

CHARMIN SMITH: Muay Thai is a form of kickboxing, and it's something I stumbled upon that has been really influential for me and changed my life. I would say because it reminds me what it's like to be in their shoes, to do something that is extremely challenging, something that pushes you outside of your comfort zone.

Those days where I don't feel like doing Muay Thai anymore, I don't feel like pushing through the hard reps, I'm, like, no, but you tell Michelle to push through, so you have to push through, right? You are on Marta.

It has really made me a better coach in that I can be in their shoes and understand what they need to get motivated on those challenging days.

THE MODERATOR: Michelle, can you talk about STEM, first of all what it stands for, and what's the most creative thing you have done in that program?

MICHELLE ONIYAH: STEM is the basis of everything we do in life. It's technology, mathematics, and engineering, right? Science, technology, mathematics, engineering for STEM. STEM is everything for me.

What brings it up is the biotechnology, working with your BCUs and FCUs, attendance and making medical devices for people that help the community and help other countries, right? STEM is everything. I want to pursue it. I want to show the world that anybody can do basketball at Cal Berkeley and biomechanics.

That's one of the things I want them to learn and show our students, little kids about that technology, because it will always be there. So yeah.

THE MODERATOR: You have already made one transition when you transitioned to Cal. Are there lessons in that transition that you plan now to try to apply as you guys are making the move into the ACC?

IONNA KRIMILI: Yeah, 100%. I think first of all, coming to Cal I did not think I would take my sixth year, but after season it was a no-brainer for me. Like playing for Coach

Charmin and having those teammates, I was kind of like, I need to come back. I knew the goals that we had for the season, so I was, like, I want to be part of it.

Yeah, like, my first four years I played for WCC coming to Pac-12. Like, the competition and you need to show up every night, but I'm very excited for ACC. Most teams from ACC go to the -- almost half of the teams go to the NCAA Tournament. I'm excited and looking forward to play them.

THE MODERATOR: You have a very experienced transfer class along with a recruiting class. Can you talk about the challenges -- and some fine returners as well -- but the challenges as a head coach to bring all that together and plan for this upcoming season when there's a lot of unknowns?

CHARMIN SMITH: It's actually been easier than I thought. We have nine newcomers, and then this veteran core group. I think the people that we brought in, right, the personalities that we brought in has made it a lot easier and the leadership that we have here is just really clicking.

You know, sometimes we're, like, okay, remember, she's a freshman. Have some patience. But they just care about each other, and they're helping each other out, and they care about winning, and they want to be great. The buy-in is huge. It's made it a really easy transition for us getting everyone acclimated.

THE MODERATOR: The other piece is your growth of the Race For Change event. Can you speak to that and why this is so important to you?

CHARMIN SMITH: Yeah, I'm going to have to give credit to Tara at Stanford. When I was there as an assistant, Hurricane Katrina happened and I was very frustrated and I didn't like how our country responded in that moment.

I was just complaining, and Tara said to me, well, Charmin, what are you going to do about it? I was, like, what do you mean? She's, like, well, you're talking. What are you going to do about it? I was, like, okay.

At that point I put together the Katrina Assist Pledge Program where every assist that we had that season people could pledge a certain amount of money. We raised over \$18,000 for the Habitat for Humanity organization in Katrina and to help rebuild homes.

So that sticks with me all the time. Again, this is coming off the summer of the murder of George Floyd and other countless individuals.

I was, like, what can we do about it? This was one of



those things where we have this race. We just had the fifth annual Race for Change. We raised over \$7,000 for our diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice program that's run by Dr. Ty Douglas. This helps our student-athletes have an inclusive environment within Cal.

It's just phenomenal. We're giving back to our student-athletes to help in that social justice piece. It's growing. This year we had Gary Payton and Antonio Davis in the house, and Dr. John Carlos was back.

So we're just continuing to build this event and make positive change within our community.

THE MODERATOR: Marta, art is really important to you. Can you speak about where this passion came from and then maybe what you're working on right now in that area?

MARTA SUAREZ: Well, it's just something that I have always done besides every student-athlete. We all have something to kind of, like, let go and kind of be creative and explore yourself as a person.

I got to say, again, hit up Jay. It's been a great add to the team. Jay and I will just spend time working together. It's been very fun.

Yeah, I just do art pieces for people in the community and for -- for example, I work with, like, middle schools, and we're working on a mural right now.

It's just something I do for fun. Nothing crazy, but something that really, really matters to me and that has helped me allot deal with all the struggles from being a student-athlete, being tired, being stressed. It's just kind of like a creative outlet for me.

THE MODERATOR: Michelle, obviously, new conference. You're going to have a new set of fans learning about the Cal Bears. What would you say to them right now about this team, this program, and what they should expect from you guys this season?

MICHELLE ONIYAH: Honestly expect the most out of us because we are here to play. We're here in the Pac-12, and now we're here in the ACC to come through the ACC conference. We do excite and we always enjoy the time. Always have fun on the on the court. We all be smiling and are always a team player. So come ready for us, honestly, because we're ready for you honestly.

THE MODERATOR: Do you have anything to add?

IONNA KRIMILI: We're just really excited. It's kind of like we put the work. It's not that we're just talking. Whoever

comes to our practice, you will see us going at each other, but we know that stays on the court.

We're just very, very competitive, so I think it's really exciting.

THE MODERATOR: Charmin, obviously a lot of new players, but what should we expect this year in terms of style of play?

CHARMIN SMITH: Yeah, I think building off of last year, this is a really high-octane group in terms of our offense. We shoot a lot of threes. We are going to make a lot of threes this year.

We have very versatile players. You can see Marta bringing the ball down the floor. We're just a good gel of athleticism and talent and skill.

Then, you know, picking things up on the defensive end I think is a focus for us. We know we have to get stops in the ACC in order to compete. We're ready for the challenge.

THE MODERATOR: Marta, I know there's excitement in coming into this season. Was there anything that you added to your game in preparation?

MARTA SUAREZ: 100%. I think to me it was more about decision-making from this year. Also, hey, I'm one of the seniors now. I'm more stepping into a leadership position. So it's, like, okay, let's take care of that ball. Let's find our Bears. We talk about it a lot in practice, shot selection. We have a lot of great shooters, a lot of great scorers. So how do we work together to find that great shot that's going to carry over into getting wins? That is what we care about.

THE MODERATOR: Ionna, last year, same question to you. Is there anything like, Oh, I want to do this before I leave Cal?

IONNA KRIMILI: I feel very lucky because Charmin gave me the opportunity to start working with Susan Borchardt. During this time where I was just kind of, like, oh, why do I need to get better because it's my sixth year. I want to help my team. I was working, like, on and off the court kind of, like, to become approximate more athletic and working on myself, like on my decision-making, as Marta.

For us I think it's going to be very important being leaders because we have so many new people. Just watching film from last year I just wanted to be not only a shooter. I wanted to help my team defensively and also be able to drive to the basket.

THE MODERATOR: Charmin, obviously it's not just for everybody else in the ACC. It's getting ready for three new teams. For you you're getting ready for 17 new teams. For 16. One you're familiar with. Did you and your staff do anything differently this past offseason in preparation?

CHARMIN SMITH: We did. We took scouting assignments over the summer and just divvied out the ACC teams. Then we brought the scouts back and watched film. We wanted to really have a good understanding.

I know Duke. I know North Carolina. I know Notre Dame. We see them a lot. Louisville. The other teams, like, is this a pressing league, a zone league. We did a lot of research and scouting prep over the summer to make sure that we were moving into the preseason getting ready the right way.

**Q. One of the things that I have loved hearing up here is life outside of basketball, and one thing that really caught my attention, I understand you like to build go-karts, Michelle. When did that start?**

MICHELLE ONIYAH: Engineering background. Yeah, I build go-karts. I started building go-karts with my sister, Amara, I think seventh, eighth grade. Then I started building skateboards. That's why I built for Charmin and built for my friends on the East Coast, West Coast. I learned that over the past four years in high school in engineering with the STEM Academy.

The engineering background is the idea of building things and seeing how far we can push technology, honestly. I want to push it as much as possible. That's why I'm at Berkeley. That's why I'm in biomechanics and bioengineering. I want to build go-carts, skateboards, medical devices. You name it, I'll be here.

**Q. My next question is, being a student-athlete and balancing all that, being in the STEM program, how do you find time to balance all of that? What is your advice to students who may not be a student-athlete, but are still having trouble balancing all that?**

MICHELLE ONIYAH: Definitely. Honestly it's all about willpower, and if you want it that badly, you can do it. Honestly for me I go to work. I go to lab after 8:00 a.m. to, like, 2:00, have practice from 2:30 to 5:00, 6:00, have class after that, and then I go back to the lab and work on my project, work on my coding, work on that.

If you want to do it, you can do it. Even if you you're not an athlete, put time in what you have joy and love. That's the

purpose of life. If you enjoy it and love it, you will prosper. You will be amazing. People will look at you, like, I want to be like you. That's how I think about it, honestly.

MARTA SUAREZ: Do what excites.

MICHELLE ONIYAH: Do what excites.

THE MODERATOR: As we've heard, the best balance of student-athletes that we are seeing. Perfect to join with the ACC. Cal Bears, welcome. Good luck this season.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports