

Atlantic Coast Conference Basketball Tipoff Media Day

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Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

North Carolina Tar Heels

Coach Courtney Banghart

Alyssa Ustby

Lexi Donarski

Maria Gakdeng

Women's Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Happy to introduce the UNC Tar Heels to the stage. Head coach Courtney Banghart going into her sixth season. We next have Lexi Donarski, the grandma of the ACC now, and Alyssa Ustby, and then Maria Gakdeng. Welcome, ladies.

Courtney, I guess we'll start with you. Just give us an overview of the team right now, kind of what excites you about this upcoming season beyond the fact that we're healthy.

COURTNEY BANGHART: Well, geez, that's big news. I think this is a really connected group. It's a very popular time to talk about those type of words, but it's not a word I would have always used, and this group is really connected with one another.

We have a healthy blend of experience with a lot of youthful talent. Most importantly, our experience really intangibly sheds that to their peer group in a really connected way.

And we're healthy. Yay. Knock on everything that you know. No, we've got some guys off redshirt we know will help us, we've got some young guys we know will help us, and we know we've got some great experience here that we'll lean on all year.

THE MODERATOR: It almost seems like your veterans have been with you, and they've got a lot of experience, but you've got a lot of youthful pieces that I think you're going to have to rely on. Can you talk about how you've had to blend the two groups?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah. We also had two off the



transfer portal that come in with a lot of experience that have been a great add. They fit our needs. For Reniya and Indya and these guys there's a lot of basketball that they've played already in their careers.

And then you bring Ciera Toomey off her redshirt year and then you bring in a talented trio of freshmen that they really don't act like freshmen. It's been a great group. Their skill sets are different from one another. Practices are uber-competitive.

I get to coach this team more than manage this team so far, which has been really fun.

THE MODERATOR: As veterans, we'll start with you, Lexi, do you understand that comment that coach just made, she doesn't have to manage you guys? Did you always understand it maybe as a younger player?

LEXI DONARSKI: Yeah, I don't know. Probably not. This group is really special. The chemistry that we have on and off the court already this early in the season is truly special. We're just excited to see that continue to grow throughout the year.

THE MODERATOR: Alyssa, I have always described your game as you're a Swiss Army knife because you do so many things to impact the game. Is there anything that now you have added going into your final season to your repertoire?

ALYSSA USTBY: Going into my final season expanding my range and being able to comfortably shoot the three and make shots at the three. That's been a big part of my game, and I have also learned a lot of different moves and picked up a lot of things from my teammates because we have a really talented group and we're constantly -- iron sharpens iron.

So we're constantly every practice working hard and making each other better in many different ways.

THE MODERATOR: Maria, I want to ask you to speak on your head coach. Adversity last year. I think what's really remarkable to me is the number of red shirts that UNC has



and players stay. That's not typical in this day and age anymore. Injury, people leave, or not playing. What is it about Courtney's leadership that makes people gravitate to this program and want to play for her?

MARIA GAKDENG: Yeah, with CB what you see is what you get. She's a very honest coach and she's going to tell you what it is. I think with the players that didn't get to play last year, they dealt really well with us as teammates, but also as a coach. She's a leader. She knows what she's talking about and how to effectively coach.

Even though we had a lot of injuries this past year, we still managed to get to the second round of the tournament, so I think with these new pieces and now that we're healthy, we're going to make it a lot farther.

THE MODERATOR: Having everybody healthy and having the pizza that you have, style of play going to be what we've seen, or is there anything new we should expect?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Oh, me? I'll take that, yeah. Each group has its own vibe, and this group is much easier to score the ball. We've had a tough time scoring the past few years, and the ball stuck at times, right? We're now playing off of close-outs better, and we're playing off of space because the ball is moving better.

Alyssa's ability to shoot has allowed us to now expand our range. Same thing with Ciera. She is a great shooter as well. Lexi is doing more off of the dribble.

Last year because we were so injured a lot was leaned on on these guys, and they didn't perform over fatigue over the course of the last six weeks as much as they wanted. They all got in the gym and got better.

The experience piece are better, but the offense will be very different. I think we'll still have a similar defensive toughness, but the offense will look very different. We don't -- I mean, I know you guys were hoping that by the time you're experienced you know the offense, but it's totally different this year, so we have a bunch of new guys.

Q. My question for you is you have a great blend of offense, great blend of defense. You can rebound and block shots like no other. What part of your game do you feel like you still need to work on?

MARIA GAKDENG: I think over the summer something I've definitely worked on is my shooting, my midrange shooting. Kind of like that pick and roll, pick and pop type of action. Being able to make those shots and not finish around the basket but further out and working on that

throughout the summer has been really effective.

I definitely think it's going to help me grow as a player.

Q. Courtney, obviously the transfer portal era is crazy. How jarring was it to have six players transfer and then you bring in all these newcomers and then you have the staff changes? How jarring was that all season for you and the players?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah, I wouldn't use the word jarring at all. Transfers -- I don't know what people -- what the right language is on it, but you're never surprised, right? It's a two-way decision most of the time, right? It's very rarely -- and I'll speak for just North Carolina -- it's rarely that someone would walk into your office and say, I'm transferring, and it's rarely you would say that's only your decision.

The great thing about the portal is it let's you reinvent your team and add as needed and also subtract at times. The two guys -- we had four four-year seniors last year. You can't keep all four seniors, otherwise, you can't get a freshman class from a numbers perspective.

We wanted to honor their four-year careers and ensure that we had an opportunity to grow our program at the same time.

Getting Tray and Grace out of the portal, just like Maria and Lexi, we were able to pick a kid that was exactly what the existing group needs. I think if you had asked us on February 1st what the roster is going to look like, I think we all would have picked this roster.

Again, it's not something that -- the media likes to think it's this jarring experience where all of a sudden your team changes, but that's just not how it is inside the lines.

Q. A question for Alyssa. You've said on a podcast before how you were the fifth pick-up of your incoming freshman class and that you brought the class ranking down. But looking forward now, fifth year going in, what can you reflect on? How was your journey? Can you just talk about how you developed over this time?

ALYSSA USTBY: Yeah. I think looking back to that it's been a big trust the process kind of journey, but I attribute a lot of my successes to my teammates because they've taught me a lot of things that I didn't have the resources to learn from when I was in middle school and high school and trying to figure out what my basketball career would look like.

Also, just being a part of an incredible program that has

coaches that are invested in my development. I've just been really fortunate to have, and I'm really blessed to be on this path and grateful for the opportunity, and especially this fifth year ahead.

Q. Lexi, over the summer you went to and helped coach at the Davis Camp. Can you talk about that experience in helping young women develop their game? It seems to be a passionate part of who you are as a person?

LEXI DONARSKI: Yeah. I really enjoy running camps and training younger kids. We run a camp in our hometown where we're from in Lacrosse, Wisconsin. We got a great turnout and it was a lot of fun, and we look forward to continuing to do that in the future.

THE MODERATOR: Courtney, with the addition of the three new teams to the ACC, is there anything that you and your staff did differently this offseason in preparation, or is it just --

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah, new teams, new people. I think we've been in that mid-pod for all five years. I got to play Virginia Tech and their best run in history twice -- or three times every year. We got to play NC State in one of their better runs twice a year. Got to play Virginia and their rebirth and got to play Duke where everybody else was maybe not playing those teams twice.

I am the proponent of yay, welcome. I am looking forward to playing everybody one time and our rival twice. I think that will be a better true champion in our league and less based on where you are located in terms of who your double round robin is.

I think we also expanded our national footprint, which I think is important in a basketball conference. We've added great academic institutions to the league. You know, I think this is going to be -- we haven't done anything strategically or tactically different because we're just adding more elite teams to an elite conference.

Q. I want to ask you, what does Blanca and Ciera this year bring to the front court this season?

MARIA GAKDENG: Yeah, they definitely add a lot. Ciera is one of our post players, but she he can also shoot the ball really well from the three. I think having a player that can do that at the four is really effective for the five.

Blanca is a good five post-up player, and she's going to be a really good freshman I think who is coming in. She's been playing really well in practice, and I think she's been doing well with adversity. They're going to be really good

this year.

Q. Be easier to maneuver inside with those two additions?

MARIA GAKDENG: I believe so, yes. I think they've gotten a lot better over the summer, and since Blanca has gotten here and Ciera has been here for a year, so she's been working on defense, offense. I think they're going to be really great.

Q. This one is for Courtney. You talked about obviously the offense. I wanted to elaborate on that. You mentioned maybe at times it was those stagnant, the ball stuck, things like that. How have you gone about, I guess, fortifying an identity on the offensive side with this new group, and how would you describe I guess the offensive identity of this year's team?

COURTNEY BANGHART: Yeah, it's funny. I've been head coach for almost 20 years, and we've had really good defensive teams. My team can play offense, right?

If I'm being honest, for the last six weeks of the season we had five posts all healthy. We had five guards all not healthy. If you are going to play basketball without a position, it's a little easier to play with five guards, right?

Our offense was really packed in so they were relying on outside shooting. We didn't have a lot of outside shooting aside from Lexi who was really blanketed. You could double in the post. When you are limited it's remarkable what their energy, grit, and defensive toughness brought them given all of that.

We just have a lot more space now, and the ball moves much more fluidly. Now you're playing against close-outs or against shifting defense, not against a shell, right?

So our actions -- we have more fluid actions. We can play with more freedom in space, and so our actions are very different, which you guys will see. Really it's what you are going to notice the most is the spacing and the movement of the ball is what you are probably going to notice the most.

Q. This one is for just any of the players. You guys touched on it earlier, but just some of the challenges of last season with all the injuries, what are the biggest takeaways, lessons that you guys took from that?

ALYSSA USTBY: I think one of the biggest takeaways when you have a lot of teammates that go down with an injury is how important those individuals still are to the whole. We've had a lot of those injured individuals be able

to constantly pour into the girls that are playing at practice and in games and be able to point out things and just utilize their high basketball IQ in order to keep pushing the needle and pushing our team forward, although they can't be inside the lines.

Q. Lexi, you are known to be a great shooter, but a lot of those looks are coming off of catch-and-shoot opportunities. And wrapping coach into this too, you talked about having more spacing. How important is it to have people like Alyssa and Maria to be able to find you when you are trying to navigate?

LEXI DONARSKI: Yeah, it's very important. A lot of my looks last year were off of catch-and-shoot threes, and a lot of the times it was from either a post feed or an attack from these two right here.

I would say something that we've been working on since like what Coach was saying that our spacing is a lot better. The floor is open. It's working on me attacking more coming off the dribble and getting more variety of shots.

COURTNEY BANGHART: Also, Maria has more now one v. one coverage, which we're forgetting what she did last year being double-teamed or playing against Sag all year (phonetic).

And same with Alyssa being able to expand. I mean, Alyssa can pop and shoot now, which she really was limited in last year, which again, that crowd is easier for her to be doubled as well.

Not only is it going to be easier for Lexi to run off of actions and get looks, but her responsibility is also going to be to get other people looks now that there's more spacing together.

THE MODERATOR: Maria, Alyssa, Lexi, Coach Banghart, thank you very much. UNC, look out.

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