

Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Media Day

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Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Arizona Wildcats

Coach Adia Barnes

Helena Pueyo

Esmery Martinez



Q. I know this year's team is going to look a lot different than last year's team. You've got five returning players. Let's start with that, kind of the state of the program and what you're excited about this group this year.

ADIA BARNES: Well, I'm really excited because it's a great young group. Just excited for all the changes, a good core group of freshmen, and just excited for just this year, the last year in the Pac-12, and just excited for some good basketball, probably our best Pac-12 yet.

Q. The freshmen need to be highly impactful. Give us a quick overview of what you expect from them.

ADIA BARNES: Because you never know what to truly expect with freshmen, but I've been telling you, we always say this as coaches, you want a player that actually wants to play their position, and Brea Cunningham, she's a post player that actually wants to be a post. That's weird nowadays, but she's been exciting, great hands, getting in great shape, finishing well around the basket, does not play like a freshman so far. Then Jada has been just so much fun, just already shows leadership as a freshman and just a lot of things that she does are small things that you wouldn't think a freshman would do.

Q. Last year your attendance was phenomenal. Was it intention with the SID department or was it a campaign between you and your team that really brought all those people out to support you?

ADIA BARNES: I think it's Tucson is a basketball. If you look back at Lute Olson and the history, we've always been really known for basketball.

I think that early on when I first got to Arizona eight years ago, we were really intentional about getting out in the community and being really active and just having some

connection there.

I think it just grew, and it helped winning some games along the way and having some success. But they just love basketball in Tucson. I think our team and program has a really good time of connecting with the fans. We were No. 1 attendance in the Pac-12, so I'm very proud of that.

Q. With obviously so much talk about the conference and where it's headed, is there an added motivation to sort of go out with a bang? Are you trying to keep it at a minimum? How are you approaching this season with your players, the message to be sent, focus here, but also wanting to go out with a bang?

ADIA BARNES: That's not even a thought. My focus is this year, these great young women. I have some super seniors. It's probably some of the best Pac-12 basketball in history. I think I'm so excited about that. You doesn't even look ahead because the main thing is to win now and live in the present. Just excited about the talent we're going to have, all the great players, the excitement, how there's so much parity, and then just not really looking ahead because we've got to win now today.

Q. What do you think your greatest challenge is going to be this year to get your team to their best spot?

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, so I think our greatest challenge is going to be just our youth and just the experience. The fact of the matter is that we're going to play a lot of young players. We have some really good super seniors, but mixing in so many new players and the core being young.

But the positive thing I think is in this day and age when you're coaching and recruiting, if you get really good freshmen like the McDonald's All-Americans you're not going to retain them if they don't play, so the positive thing is they're going to play.

Now, might that mean we might lose some game because of mistakes, that could be potential, but I'm looking at the future and how I want to build off the court, and Arizona was our best when we had our core together for three



years, and that is how - we teach a lot and the process is longer in the way that I do things, so I'm excited about that, and just excited to see Brea and Jada and Skylar thrown into the fire, and then Montaya was hurt, so that's also a hard thing for us.

Q. Do you have to coach differently in the era of the transfer portal than you maybe did --

ADIA BARNES: I think you have to coach differently in general from when I started. I'm only eight years in, and the kids are very different than they were eight years ago. I think with the portal, with retaining players, I think you're always having to recruit your players, and that's just what it is.

There's NIL, there's so many different things. You just always have to be changing as a coach and change.

Q. You guys also play a very high energy style of play. You're trapping, defensively you just use a lot of energy most of the game --

ADIA BARNES: We're going to use more energy this year.

Q. How do you do that with 10 players?

ADIA BARNES: We're going to figure it out. I think the challenge for me, too, is the challenge of having a short bench which I haven't had this short of a bench, and being able to play ourselves.

I'm going to have to have shorter practices obviously, which is hard. It's hard to be really concise and precise in a short amount of time, but it's what we do. And I'm telling you, we are going to play better defense than last year with a shorter bench.

I think for players the psychological thing is you know you're probably going to play. I think that's also fun, too, so I won't have 10 miserable people.

Q. I want to know the evolution of Kailyn Gilbert.

ADIA BARNES: Kailyn has been phenomenal, just to watch her growth from last year to this year has been incredible. She's so strong. Right now if you see her physically she looks different.

But just mentally I think she approaches the game different. She's steady a lot. She's really intentional about everything she does. We have big expectations for her.

She's just grown a lot, and I think for her, she'll play on the ball, she'll play off the ball, but she's really put in work, so

I'm expecting a really big year for her.

Q. You talked about you have such a young group. How important will Helena and Esmery be leading this team not only from a basketball standpoint, from just an experience and leadership standpoint to lead this younger group as you guys try to win games this year?

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, that's a great question. Helena and Esmery are going to be one of the most important things. We are going to go as they go. No pressure on them over there, but we need them to have great seasons, and they will. But we also strong loaders in the locker room and they will do that.

I think for them it's been really fun to watch. They love leading the type of freshmen we have. When you have freshmen that are hungry, that are great people, and they are in the gym and want to get better, I think that makes their job easier.

But we're going to expect a lot from Helena and Esmery and being aggressive on the floor. They're going to put us on their backs, and I think they're excited for the challenge. They know we're young, but they've also embraced that they have to be leaders in every sense of the way, so I'm excited for that. I think they are, too.

Q. Esmery in particular, every game I did last year I was so excited, I felt like you could just take a camera and just shoot her from the waist down with her footwork. It's so exceptional. What is it like to coach a player that the game just comes so naturally to?

ADIA BARNES: It's really fun, and we just had to work a lot on her not fouling out. She hasn't fouled in practice anymore. Before she fouled out in practice and the games.

No, I think just going from the Big 12 for her to the Pac-12 was a big adjustment because she's talked about it was a lot more physical and the Pac-12 wasn't as physical. She had that learning curve. This year she already knows that. She knows what to expect.

But she's so much fun to coach because she's versatile. She's really improved and worked on her three, so she'll be more consistent.

But I love the fact that you can't teach a player like her how to rebound. She's got the nose if the ball and it's instinctual, and I love coaching players like her. We need some more Esmerys.

Q. I'm curious, they both had an opportunity to go

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

play professionally and both thought about it. How do you guide your players through those types of decisions and those two in particular?

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, so I think we talked about the changes in the coaching is you're now having to think about all those things, going pro, money, NIL, all that stuff. They both had really good opportunities. Helena passed up a three-year pro contract to stay her fifth year in college, but she'll leave in a Master's Degree. If you would asked Helena that four years ago she would've said, heck no, I'm going back to Spain.

But I think it's a great opportunity. We have a chance to be really good in one of the best conferences in the country. I think she wanted to just have one more go at it, and she's going to have a really big role. I think that's also exciting for her.

For her, she plays every position for us. She was our captain last year. She'll lead again this year. I think all those things were something she really embraced and she passed up the money. But for her, she'll have that later.

Q. You've really turned the page. I know Cate Reese was your first really big recruit and she's moved on. So the gauntlet of leadership has really moved on to a whole 'nother group. What's that feel like at practice?

ADIA BARNES: It's great because now there's more tradition and there's higher expectations, and there's now the challenge of trying to get over the hump how do you get to that next level and get to where you win a championship. We were one basket away.

I think these players are really showing the freshmen what it's about, and we can really win big time with these freshmen in a couple years.

I think with these seniors, who they are on the court, off the court, in the classroom is really positive, so I'm just excited, and I think they want to go out with a bang. They want this year to be special, and then they're both going to go on and play pro and hopefully in the WNBA, so I'm excited about that.

Q. I know you've said that this is a gritty group and a defensive-minded group. How do you think about -- when you construct your roster and you're trying to figure out who you're bringing in what exactly is it that you're looking for, and can you tell that by watching a high schooler play?

ADIA BARNES: Yeah, I think that the first -- I think at first a lot of people get caught up in all the McDonald's this and

that. I don't really care about any of that stuff. I said it's going to be gritty, not always pretty, which is true because they'll be young, but we're going to be tough. I can already tell in practice we are going to be way better defensively than we were last year, because last year we were very offensive minded, but my team has invested and we've been very defensive minded.

So they're going to play hard. They're coachable. They want to play. They want to win.

I know the style that I want to play. So getting those players that are selfless, that are gym rats, those are hard to find. Toughness, the mentality, all those things, and they want to be great teammates. I was a blue collar player that wasn't that talented, but I was a very good teammate, and I would have done everything. If Joan would have said run through a wall, I would've ran through a wall.

You want those kind of players, and we have that and we went to a championship. When you're recruiting you're looking for all those small things.

Q. A blue collar player who also scored a lot of points, the leading scorer in the history of the program. Anything we should definitely ask your players about as they make their way to the stage?

ADIA BARNES: Ask them about what they expect this year, and their leadership, of course.

Q. You both had an professionally and you both decided to come back. Helena, what was it ultimately that made that decision for you to come back to Tucson for one more year?

HELENA PUEYO: For me, I want to win games. I want to finish strong here in the program. I mean, Adia was a huge part for me to come back. Adia makes me feel like home there, so I just want to come back, win games and finish really strong.

ESMERY MARTINEZ: For me, I think I didn't give enough last year, and I think I could do better, and I feel I needed another opportunity, and for school, too, that's why I'm coming back because I want to go have my degree, and I made it.

Q. Esmery, I'm so excited you're here because after every game last year I said could we please interview you and you said I don't really feel comfortable in front of the camera, so to come here is a big step. Your ability, your footwork in the paint, rebounding-wise and just your feel for the game, where does it come

from, because it really is next level?

ESMERY MARTINEZ: Well, I think where I'm coming from, we are aggressive. I played (indiscernible) basketball, too, and I feel I'm aggressive because I can play, like do anything.

I think it's a gift that God give to me, because I don't really know how I can do that, too. And that's it.

Q. Esmery, you spent some time over the summer playing for your national team. What did you take from that experience, and how proud were you to get that opportunity to play for your national team?

ESMERY MARTINEZ: Well, I'm proud because I didn't play for my national team for five years because I came here to the United States. So I think my family, my people back home, they was happy and glad for me to represent my country. For me, it was good for me because it was good for me to be in shape, too, and to learn new stuff about all the people.

Q. We heard so much about your leadership and the way Coach is looking for you to bring this young group up to speed. How have you sought to do that and what excites you most about having that role this season?

ESMERY MARTINEZ: Well, for me, it's complicated to be a leader because to lead you've got to have everything. But I'm just trying to do the best that I can and trying to work hard so that the freshmen can see I'm going to work hard, and they can see a good leader on them.

HELENA PUEYO: For me, I think talking about leadership, I think having these four years playing in this conference, I think all the experience from that I can take and bring it to my new teammates.

Also I think I'm the only one from the National Championship game, so I think all that experience and like helping them and teaching them how to play in our system, I think that will be a really good part.

Q. What did you guys add to your game in the off-season?

HELENA PUEYO: I mean, just a little bit of everything, I think. Just trying to work every detail, like everything, looking like watching video from last year and just being able to know our mistakes and just how to fix them.

But for me, I've been playing more 3-on-3 this past summer, and that really helped me a lot because it's a really fast game. You've got to make really fast decisions

through the games. That really helped me a lot.

ESMERY MARTINEZ: Yeah, same.

Q. Esmery, I read just the importance and the power of graduating from college, the first person in your family to do that. Walk us through that experience of accomplishing that and what it means to you and your family.

ESMERY MARTINEZ: Well, for me, it's a real big important for my life and my family, too, because I feel like if my family see me that I been through all this and I made it, you know, they can see they can do it, too.

I think my family are glad, my people are glad that I've been that far.

Q. We talked with Coach Adia about the impact of having 10 players and what that's going to require in terms of minutes played and people stepping up. From your standpoint, what excites you about that opportunity, or how do you look at how short the bench is going to be this year?

HELENA PUEYO: I'm really excited. Sometimes I like more to play with less players instead of being like 15 players so we can have more time playing together. Also, I think we're like a really good -- we have a really good talented freshmen this year, so having them the opportunity to play more time during games is going to also help for the future for the program, so they'll just be able to create that teamwork together.

But yeah, I think it's just going to be great. I think we're doing really good practices right now, and I think also we have a lot of unselfish players, and that's what I like. I think it's going to really help us win games.

Q. What are you most excited to see play out as the season is right around the corner?

ESMERY MARTINEZ: Well, I'm focused this year to be the best leader, and I'm excited. I'm excited to see all the young players. I'm just happy. I feel really comfortable playing with them. I feel like they're really good. They're tough. Like they're good.

Q. Helena, in 3-on-3 back you mentioned your game grew, which is outstanding. For four years in Tucson I have heard Coach Barnes yell at you to shoot the ball more. Do you have a goal in mind of how many shots you would like to get upper game?

HELENA PUEYO: I don't really think about that. I just



want to take good shots. I don't really take bad shots all the time, but I know this year I have a really big part on that, and I have to do a better job on that.

So as a fifth year with all the experience, I'm pretty sure I'm going to shoot more the ball than these last three or four years.

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