

# Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Media Day

Tuesday, October 10, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Utah Utes

Coach Lynne Roberts

Gianna Kneepkens

Alissa Pili



**Q. I think about what you guys were able to do last season, a historic season in every way. As you reflect on your journey, what comes up for you and how did you do it because it wasn't a straight line?**

LYNNE ROBERTS: Yeah, I think this is the third program that I've taken over, and I enjoy doing things, one, for the first time. Utah had an incredible storied history in the Mountain West, Coach Elaine Elliott and all the success, and when they moved to the Pac-12 she retired.

So when I took over, we hadn't done much in the Pac-12 at all as a program.

I like doing things -- to do things for the first time, meaning try to win here for the first time, grow attendance for the first time, do all these things, and then I also really enjoy doing things that people say you can't do.

When I came in and the program was pretty flat line, I knew the potential, and it just takes -- just like anything, doing anything for the first time, doing anything that people think you can't do, it's hard, but if you trust in yourself and you trust in the process, and then ultimately you just have to work your tail off.

But I think winning programs, success in anything, it just comes down to the right people. So I've got an incredible staff that makes me look good, and we have done a good job recruiting kids that fit our program and our university and our community, and I don't think there's anything secret sauce other than get the right people around you and work your tail off.

**Q. Lynne, a year ago I did two games at your place that I will never forget. One was scoring 124 against a nationally ranked Oklahoma squad and another was beating Stanford on the last game of the season. Part of that for me was how much huntsman has changed.**

LYNNE ROBERTS: Yeah, along that same vein, I think if you look at any basketball, men or women, the programs that have sustained success year after year, they've got a home atmosphere, and they've got fans and community that are faithful and feverish.

The year before I got to Utah, they averaged 570 fans, and then last year by the end of the year, we were at 10,000.

It was incredibly validating to see that -- not the I told you so, but kind of. I knew we could do this here.

Now our charge is we don't want to be, oh, remember that one great year we had. Remember that one great game against Stanford. That is what I want our norm to be, which again, is hard. It takes a lot of work, and we're up to the challenge.

**Q. Do you have your Energy-C stuff, your little packets you got me on to?**

LYNNE ROBERTS: Emergen-C, if you could get it right.

**Q. You probably have an NIL deal with that.**

LYNNE ROBERTS: I should, with the amount of money I've invested in them. I should get some kick-back.

**Q. You have always been the hunter; you are now the hunted. How do you change that mindset with your team?**

LYNNE ROBERTS: I don't think we are. I still think what makes us great is that we still have so much to prove. I think that's what our team is about. We're very kind of blue collar. We're great because of the sum of the parts. That's not going to change.

While, yes, we've got some incredibly talented players, they know they're good because of the program and the teammates and all that.

We still haven't done everything we want to do. We're still hunting. I don't buy into that. I think, yes, we'll have a

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bigger target on our back, but as we say, too, pressure is a privilege. We want it. But I still feel like we're hunting.

**Q. Do you think teams are going to play you because you put up such big numbers last year, what do you expect to see defensively? Do you expect to see big adjustments in the non-conference or from your conference opponents considering how prolific you were on the offensive end?**

LYNNE ROBERTS: I don't know, I think we'll be prepared for whatever. I think we're a team with how we can score in different ways, we're really hard to zone. Every week in practice we would go over our zone stuff, and it's like, all right, guys, we're going to get zone, it's going to happen, and then a couple times we did. The other team got out of it pretty quick.

You know, with the way we play, Alissa Pili, for example, the other team's center guards her typically, that's a tough guard because she shot 42, 43 percent from three.

So I don't know what teams might do. We will play at Baylor the third game of the season, so that'll be a good early test. They may defend us differently than we've seen, and then we play South Carolina on December 10th. They're obviously a very aggressive, athletic, defensive team, so I think those two games will really show us what we need to work on as we get in the Pac-12 for maybe different defenses than we're used to.

**Q. What will you do this season to get ready to master your gritty?**

LYNNE ROBERTS: If I had some players that could teach me better, I think I could probably do a better job, but I'll work on it.

**Q. With this little exchange, explain how in keeping the relationship fun is really important as much as it is sort of keeping things serious as the favorite in this conference? Why is something like that so important for the chemistry of this team?**

LYNNE ROBERTS: That's just my personality, unfortunately, for better or worse. These guys are like, yeah.

I do think, and I say it, our team is about three things, and it's on the wall in our practice gym, but grind, grit, and fun. Grind, meaning you show up every day. That's a life skill. You're going to have to show up. Whatever you want to do in life, just show up. Just keep showing up. There's going to be great days, hard days. You've just got to keep showing up. Grit is the ability to do hard things when

they're hard. If you want to do anything great, you want to do anything for the first time, you want to do anything that people say you can't do, you're going to have to have a lot of grit. I do, and our team does.

But at the end of the day, if it's not fun, you're going to get burned out, no matter what your goal is, if you're not having fun. For me, that's kind of my personality. I'm very driven and push, but I want to have fun along the way.

I love coming to work. It doesn't feel like work. I love who I work with. My players are funny. I'm usually the butt of most jokes, which I love, because I give it right back. People around our program for the first time are like, wow, you guys are really teasing each other, but that's how we kind of roll, and it just makes it fun.

A basketball season is really long, and you've got to be able to celebrate and enjoy every part of it, and when you surround yourself with good people like I have been blessed enough to do, it's really fun.

**Q. Obviously what Alissa was able to do in changing the dynamic of the team and what she added, and then Gianna since she stepped on the floor for you.**

LYNNE ROBERTS: I'll start with Gianna. I will say this confidently: She's one of the most competitive players I've ever coached, matched with, coupled with the best work ethic I've ever seen. She works harder than anybody else, and it doesn't come for, oh, I want people to see me do this. It's all in the dark. It's because she wants to win. She knows what it takes. This is what I need to do, Gianna, so that we win. That's all she cares about.

So to have somebody like that in your program, and then your freshmen come in and new kids come in and watch her, and like, whoa, this is how we do it, and it just rises everybody up. I was super excited about her. She looks better than she ever has, just confident, poised in her game.

Then Alissa, I think the coolest thing and the biggest compliment I can give to Alissa, everyone knows how talented she is. Everyone saw what she's able to do. She is such an incredible teammate. She came into our program and we recruited her, but you never really know how things go, and she has completely bought in without ego to what we're trying to do as a team.

When you do that, when you're a talent like she is, everybody rallies behind you and pushes.

I have been so impressed with her. She's just an incredible teammate and competitor, and that's what --

these two are a huge reason as to why we're sitting where we are today.

**Q. Ladies, are there some tips, or as you look at Coach's gritty, were there some things you think maybe she could work on to improve or she is what she is?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Overall rhythm.

ALISSA PILI: And energy, as well.

**Q. How has media day been going for you?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: It's been awesome, great conversations, pictures. It's been a lot of fun.

ALISSA PILI: I agree. Just talking to some of the other players and all that, it's fun to see everybody. We see each other on the court a lot, but outside of that, it's not really the case, so it's cool to be here.

**Q. Alissa, we've watched you play from USC to Utah, and my question is is there anyone who can guard you one-on-one? I mean that in all sincerity. Is there any women's player that can come out and guard you and can stop you?**

ALISSA PILI: No. No comment. I just go out there and play. I'm not really somebody who just thinks about things like that. I just go out there and do my thing.

**Q. Coach was up here talking about how you guys still feel like you're hunting, that there's a lot to prove, that for all you accomplished last season and being picked to finish first, that there's still stuff left to prove. Can you guys both elaborate on that and how you feel like that seeps into your team conversations and the way you guys are approaching the start of this season?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I think that we have expectations for ourselves. We as a team try not to focus on what other people have to say, what the media has to say. We really are just focusing on the inner circle and the voices that matter when it comes down to it because in practice, your parents or people on the outside aren't telling you what you need to get on, so just focusing on each other and then putting those expectations because we know what we're capable of, so just working hard and get being those goals done.

ALISSA PILI: Yeah, to go off what Gianna said, a lot of it is just the type of people we are and the type of program we are. Obviously last year we had a great season, and I think we in a way proved ourselves, but I think just that

competitor mindset is just to -- we're not satisfied, and we're just hungry to win.

It's always going to be -- that's always going to be in the back of our mind, I think, and it's a good mentality to have because you're never satisfied, you're always getting better.

**Q. A majority of the coaches in the Pac-12 are women. How does it feel to be able to look at your coach and just see an overall role model, not just coaching you on the floor but just running a full program, everything that she does? What does that mean to have somebody like that that you can look up to?**

ALISSA PILI: It means everything. I think something about when I came to Utah is Coach Lynne, she's a big reason why I came and why I made my decision. Just seeing how -- she's a woman, she's been through the sport, she's been coaching at the level for a long time, and so just that experience and that knowledge and also that just relation with your players is super important for that relationship to grow.

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I think Coach Rob does a great job of showing us how he can be who you are and lead how you are. You don't have to change to be someone else, but your best and being who you are is what people want.

Like we look up to coaches in the Pac-12, younger kids are looking up to us. If we're acting and being a fraud of who we really are, we're not helping anyone out.

**Q. Your program is very analytics heavy. What's it like interacting with analytics and knowing that that's going into the decision making? Does it make it just easier to accept decisions because you know I've got to get better at X or Y?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I think it does help because not only is it -- it's just proven and it's worked for us, on paper we've won a lot of games doing it, so it makes it super easy because you're like, why wouldn't it go this way because we've won.

ALISSA PILI: Yeah, I agree. I think a lot of problems that happen with teams, sometimes it's hard to figure out what it is, and I think the analytic part kind of exposes what we need to work on and what we're doing good at and things like that. It's a good baseline for just getting better.

**Q. I'd love to get your scouting report for a few of your new players. You've added some freshmen and some transfers. Who's really standing out to you?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, we have Maty Wilke from Wisconsin. She's been super consistent and just someone I feel like we can really rely on. We also have Néné, she's from Belgium, she's 6'8", and anyone 6'8" really has an impact in the paint.

ALISSA PILI: Yeah, I agree. Our freshmen have come in and worked really hard, and I think everyone that's new to the program is learning still, but doing a great job of just making everybody around them better, working hard at buying into what we're doing here.

**Q. Somebody else that's new is a longtime favorite of Coach Rob's and that's Coach Judkins, who's been around -- he played at Utah, coached, been in the NBA. What's his impact been on you?**

ALISSA PILI: It's been huge since he even stepped into our gym. We're wondering who this guy is over here on the sideline. But yeah, like you said, he's been through every level, and he's coached on the women's side.

Just having that knowledge and that experience, it's always going to help.

I think especially with him, like at my position, I can learn a lot from him, and he can definitely help me grow my game.

**Q. Once you guys hit the Pac-12 season as well as you and both Colorado have played, turning that road trip into such a difficult trip in the conference, how much pride do you take in making this a really tough trip for teams that come through the Pac-12?**

ALISSA PILI: I think we take a lot of pride of protecting our house, and that's basically it. If somebody comes into our house, we're not going to take it easy. We're not going to just be messing around. We take every game seriously, I think, and it's just that little extra pride I think we have at home to really get the win on those difficult road games.

**Q. Was the change at home last year -- when did you just start feeling it? You were 15-0 at the Hunstman, and all of a sudden it was like a tidal wave crowd.**

ALISSA PILI: No, I tell them all the time, my first year at Utah, like I'm excited to go play away because we've got the advantage, or even at home. Like I tell them when I used to come play at Utah and I wasn't used to the elevation, it would kick my butt; I'm not going to lie.

Being on the other side of that is definitely better.

**Q. Gianna, Coach talked about what a competitor you**

**are, maybe one of the most competitive players she's ever coached in her career. Where does that come from? Where you were a little kid was it always inside you?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, growing up I had five older brothers, so just every day, everything in life was just competition, whether that was finishing dinner first or getting to the car first. It was chaos growing up, but I wouldn't have it any other way. It was a blast.

**Q. I know you guys had team building and you've played some pickleball, and Coach Rob and Gianna were a team; is that correct?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yes.

**Q. How did that go?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Well, we have to be teammates or else we get a little bit heated at each other because we both want to win really, really bad.

**Q. Did you win?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: We did, thankfully.

**Q. How is her pickleball game?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Pickleball is better than her gritty.

**Q. You both have such developed skill sets, you do so many different things. What is the one thing that you have been working on that you want to be better at this year?**

GIANNA KNEEPKENS: Yeah, I think at the beginning of the summer I was just nursing an injury from the end of the season, so that kind of took away the first month or so, but then I've really just been focusing on details in my game, just like watching film from last season and just focusing on how I can get better defensively, and then like offensively my shots, making sure that it's the best shots I'm taking, so getting really game-like shots and then just focusing on making swishes and only counting swishes just so I can be as accurate as possible.

ALISSA PILI: I think the biggest thing I've been focusing on -- well, my last season, I think I finally got my confidence back. Just having that, I think going into the season, I've really been focusing on just being a smarter player, and like with my decision making and just being a teammate, being a leader.

I think the little things like those could help benefit the team



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as well as myself, so it's something I've been really honing in on.

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