

Pac-12 Conference Men's Basketball Media Day

Wednesday, October 11, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Oregon Ducks

Coach Dana Altman

Jermaine Couisnard

N'Faly Dante



THE MODERATOR: It is time to talk about the Oregon Ducks as we continue here from Pac-12 media day. It's great to have Dana Altman join us, the head coach of the Ducks, up here on the stage.

Give us a sense for how you feel about your team right now.

DANA ALTMAN: We've got a lot of work to do, a lot of new faces. Seven new scholarship athletes, five returners. Keeping those five returners healthy throughout the year is going to be important.

All of them at one time were fighting injuries last year. So keeping big Dante healthy and Jermaine, our two leading scorers back from a year ago is important to us. Nate Biddle had a good spring and summer, so we need him healthy.

It's a good group. Seven new guys are all talented and seem to want to do what we want them to do. So looking forward to it.

Q. It was impressive that you won 21 games last year, based on all the injuries you had. I guess my question is does it make you as a head coach rethink when you have that many injuries? Like do we need to change our off-season program? Do we need to tweak it? Or is it just one of those things that we ran into a bunch of bad luck last year with injuries?

DANA ALTMAN: Well, we hope it's just one of those things. This is our 14th year starting at Oregon. We never had a year like we did last year, really the last two years have kind of been. Last year was really problematic.

We have as a staff talked about it a bunch. What are we doing differently. Maybe we need to go to a little load management or something, I don't know.

We haven't changed that much. I think our weight lifting, conditioning program is really good. I think it was just one of those years that things kind of caught up with us. We've been fortunate in previous years not to have injuries, and then this year it kind of caught up with us.

Q. You touched on Dante and Jermaine, just you've always talked about getting old, staying old. Those are two fifth year senior guys, their importance of coming back and the leadership they can provide for you guys.

DANA ALTMAN: Getting old and staying old is really important now with we're still in the COVID period. We've got one more year of that where guys can get old, stay five more years. So Dante and Jermaine will be a big, big part of what we're trying to do. They're our two leading scorers back from last year.

Jermaine didn't play until January after knee surgery, but really finished the season strong for us. And Dante, he got 13 and 9 with every time he touched it, he got doubled. We didn't shoot it well from the perimeter a year ago. So everybody doubled him.

You look at his numbers, 13 and 9, shooting 60 percent, those are outstanding numbers considering you get double-teamed every time you touch it.

Jermaine and Dante, if they stay healthy and can lead us, lying both their work ethics, they're both very coachable, and I think both those guys can set a tone for our team. I think both of them are going to have big years.

Q. What are your thoughts about this being the last season in the Pac-12? Are you interested in maintaining some rivalries with some of the West Coast schools.

DANA ALTMAN: As a coach, I've been in the league the longest. It probably means a little bit more to me that the league is not going to be here. I've always really liked the league. I thought it was really competitive. Even in years that people said our league was down, I don't think it was.

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So from my perspective, you know I'm disappointed. I'm excited at the same time because now we've got new challenges ahead of us, and that keeps you going.

But as far as the second part of your question, I'd love to play some schools. I hope some schools want to play us. I've talked to Wayne, and we're going to play Oregon State once a year and keep that going. It's good for basketball in the state. It's good for our fans. Wayne and I have discussed it, and we want to play. So unless the higher-ups tell us we're not, we're going to play.

No, I'd sure love to play whatever schools. We're going to have enough travel during conference going to the East Coast. I'd love to stay on the West Coast and play some nonconference games. I haven't talked to Tommy, but I'd love to play Arizona and keep that going. Arizona State, Utah, Colorado.

Like I said, we'd love to play, and again, nonconference-wise, I'm not interested in traveling all over the country playing games nonconference now. Since we're going to have a lot of travel in our conference schedule, nonconference, I'd like to keep it more regional.

Q. Getting back to N'Faly Dante, Dana -- and I think I said it at the end of last year -- he had a better season than his numbers suggested because of what you said. Your guys' lack of perimeter shooting, allot of that was due to injuries, but getting the double-teams every night. A, the first question, did you address the shooting? Do you think shooting is going to be better just with guys not being hurt this year and guys being brought in? And is that going to make Dante's production go up this year?

DANA ALTMAN: I hope so. First of all, the returners, I mentioned that Jermaine missed half the season, and I think he's a better shooter than what he showed. Keeshawn missed 12 games with plantar fasciitis. He's a better shooter than he's shown.

And Brandon Rigsby is a better shooter. I think the guys coming back are better than what they showed a year ago. I'm giving them the excuse because they all missed a bunch of games. With the consistency of being there in practice every day.

You're a shooter, you take ten games off, eight weeks off, and you're not able to shoot the ball because of a knee injury or a foot injury, that takes away from your rhythm.

And we did recruit some good shooters. We got Bam out of junior college, who's a 40 percent shooter. Jesse can shoot it. Yeah, I think we addressed it a little bit with our

recruiting, but more so, I think the guys returning are going to shoot it better than they did a year ago.

Q. Will Richardson finished his nine-year career at Oregon last year. It felt like he was there forever, but he provided and did so much for you. Who's going to replace that, that leadership and that on the ball lead guard you've had for a long time?

DANA ALTMAN: Will was with us for five years, and we won a couple of conference championships, tournament championship, and a couple Sweet 16s. He was a big part of our program. I was a little disappointed. Our fans and some people got on him last year. He played through injuries. He fought it all year.

I was really proud of the fact that a lot of people told him to shut it down, and no, I'm going to finish. Guys fighting through injuries, tough. Back and hip and you're trying to play through it. So Will was a big part of our team, big part of our program for a long time, and now Keeshawn's going to take over more of that role.

We've got a little freshman, Jackson she will stiff from same high school as Jackson Pritchard, who's been really impressive in early workouts. Jesse can handle a little bit. Jermaine can handle a little bit.

I think we do have enough ball handlers to get the ball moving. They've got to trust each other and move the ball a little better than we have in practice. When they do that, I think we do have some capable shooters. The big thing about Dante also is we've got to keep him on the floor defensively. Our numbers defensively, the analytics and the numbers defensively, when he's on the floor, are a lot better than when he's off.

Q. Feels like you guys are going to be a little more athletic this year, faster; is that true?

DANA ALTMAN: We're going to have to play a little faster simply because some of our perimeter guys are smaller. I feel like we've got to play a little faster. Jackson, Keeshawn both give us a burst there that we haven't had since Jonny Loit maybe. I like some of our quickness in the backcourt. So, yeah, I'd like to play a little quicker.

Also, I think it would help us utilize our depth a little bit. If we got the 12 scholarship athletes healthy, I think our depth is good.

Mookie Cook is going to be out for a while. He had surgery on his ankle. He's going to be out until December, maybe early January. The other 11 guys, if they're healthy, I think our depth is pretty good.

Q. Two quick. You've had incredible success over the years with transfers. You've been putting aside some of the ones that are already JC grads. How much different is it when you used to be able to normally have a guy for a year in the program practice with you and then bring him into the lineup, as opposed to what you have to deal with now for the most part?

DANA ALTMAN: Coach, I think you know how different it is. Eugene Omoruyi was with us a year and then had a tremendous year and now is playing in the league. I liked it when guys were around the program for a year, and I knew what we were going to get right away from them.

So there's a lot of advantages for players transferring and being able to play right away. But there was some advantage to sitting out a year, getting everything in order, and then being ready to play. It's kind of mixed emotions there.

The players have the freedom to transfer right away and play right away. Sometimes it takes a while to get acclimated to that ball team and the changes in the way the coaches want you to play and trying to give them some freedom but yet keep them with the group.

But there were, when guys sat out a year, and we did that a lot at Creighton. We had a lot of five-year guys that redshirted, and we had some guys that redshirted early at Oregon, and I never thought it hurt them. I always thought academically and athletically it kind of gave them a different perspective. So I never thought it was a bad thing.

But right now it's a dirty word. If you say redshirt to anybody, they look at you. But there were some advantages to it, but we're past that now. It's a new day. I don't think there's any going back. So guys are just going to have to make the transition a lot quicker and hopefully catch on a lot quicker.

Q. Could you give us a thought on Jermaine Couisnard and N'Faly Dante, as we bring them up here and before we say good-bye to you.

DANA ALTMAN: Neither one of them are as good looking as we think they are. They really are good guys. Dante -- you know, any time you have a player that fights an ACL, 6'11", 250, and has to come back from an ACL, you see the toughness. You see the grind they go through. As a coach, it makes you appreciate them that much more.

Both guys have been really easy to work with. Jermaine bounced back from a knee surgery last year and was a big,

big part of our team in January, February, and then hurt his shoulder in March, but didn't get to play with us in the postseason. Neither guy did in the postseason when we were at NIT.

I like these two guys, the maturity they bring to the ball club, the unselfishness they bring to the ball club, I hope will rub off on some of the new guys, some of the younger guys. Like I said, Dante's been with us a long time, and he's really been a big, big part of our program. Jermaine's made an instant impact on us.

If those two guys have great years, then we'll have a lot of fun.

THE MODERATOR: Off goes Dana Altman, and Jermaine Couisnard and N'Faly Dante will join us on the stage now. Welcome, guys.

N'FALY DANTE: How are you doing?

Q. N'Faly, both you guys heard what the Coach had to say about you. Everything that you've been through, what does it mean to you to hear his appreciation for you?

N'FALY DANTE: I mean, always I appreciate this team for what they have done for me already, for like when I was going through it, it was definitely like every single day did the things that make me want to do more for the program. It was great.

Q. How motivating -- I think we all thought you guys were an NCAA Tournament team last year on paper before the season started. Obviously injuries devastated your season last year. How much have you guys used that as motivation this off-season to get ready for this season knowing that injuries kept you guys from what you wanted to accomplish?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: I feel like we all have been playing with a chip on our shoulder, just attacking the off-season how we're supposed to prepare every day. Just taking care of our bodies and really recovery, heavy on recovery, and really like being able to do different things we weren't able to do.

Q. What was the focus of the off-season for you, Jermaine?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: Just getting in the gym and getting a lot of shots up, just being able to get my confidence back knowing that I can play the game of basketball the right way. That was my biggest thing, just managing that.



Q. Let me ask you the same question, N'Faly. For you, what was the focus of the off-season?

N'FALY DANTE: For me it's just like trying to get in shape. Yeah, and then look at my weight and just go to work, be in the gym more, like Coach said. Last year I don't think I was in the gym a lot. So this year we --

Q. So you think you guys have been in the gym more this year than last year?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: Of course, of course. Me personally for sure. I feel like both of us. Since I got to workout, I was fighting neck injuries, so that stopped me from being prepared and go to the gym as much as I can.

Q. When you talk about getting your confidence back, how did you lose it?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: Just being hurt, just knowing that I can go out there and be able to help my team win. Being able to sit on the sidelines and watching them go through the war without me, that really killed my confidence. Knowing I wanted to be tough enough to fight through and I wasn't able to.

Q. Anyone that stood out so far that you think is really going to have an impact for you this year?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: I feel like both of the freshmen and the transfers. I feel like everybody actually. I feel like everybody come every day to work and work every day and try to get better and learn different things.

Q. Jermaine, for you, I know you can do both, but would you prefer to play off the ball or you like having the ball in your hands more? Is the freshman from Oregon, Jackson Shelstad, he seems like a true 1, and that allows you to play off the ball more?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: It definitely does. Like Coach says, we've got to power out and play. Anyone who gets it, any one of us can push the ball. I feel like it's about being a player, not about what we can do. Handle the ball, off the ball, we're all going to have to be off the ball at some point.

Q. How about for you, N'Faly? What has stood out for you? You're leaders on this team. What are the guys you've identified that you need to help you win this year?

N'FALY DANTE: I think it's all of them. I can't just pick one of them because I see all of them in the gym all the time.

Yeah, they're working hard. Sometimes I'm just asking myself, they're in the gym a lot, so I got to go more than they do.

I think all of them have help us for sure.

Q. One guy in particular, you have a transfer from Stetson, Mamadou Diawara.

N'FALY DANTE: He's my brother.

Q. He's from Mali, just like you.

N'FALY DANTE: Yes.

Q. You guys are friends, right?

N'FALY DANTE: Yeah, like we live in -- we had a similar experience here. We live together and we knew each other since we were in Mali before we came here. It's great to have him here.

Q. What's that like for you? Have you been showing him around town? Are there things from home that you miss that you get a little of when you have somebody from home with you?

N'FALY DANTE: Yes. One thing I love about him being with me is when I forgot -- we're Muslim. So when I forgot to pray, he give me a hard time. Get up and go pray and stuff. It's been great so far. I'm glad to have him. It's going to be a fun year for sure.

Q. What does it mean for you -- Don kind of referenced last year the expectation was to go to the NCAA Tournament of course. That's the expectation every year. You've seen, especially in year five, N'Faly, when you came in, what the expectations were from the jump. How have you balanced in your career kind of what everybody else expects as you personally go through the ACL injuries, your program goes through some of what it's gone through. How have you balanced that with what your own expectations are for yourself and for your team?

N'FALY DANTE: That's a tough one.

Q. Do you care what other people say? Do you care what other people's expectation?

N'FALY DANTE: No, just go play ball at the end of the day. You can't be worried about what other people think. Just listen to my coaching staff and go from there and win more games.

I just want to do the things to change what we left out there. When I first came here, we were like a really good team, so I've got to bring it back. I would do anything to get it back.

Q. Jermaine, for you, while you were dealing with so many injuries and knicks and dings, what did you learn about yourself as a player that's going to help you this season, from just being on the bench, seeing the floor, and the game play out in front of you?

JERMAINE COUISNARD: Just I'm a competitor. Every day I go in, I try to compete, like get as good as I was the day before. That was my biggest thing, with like just different injuries, it's like just get better every day. No matter how long it takes, at least get 1 percent better every day.

Q. N'Faly, I was talking about to Dana earlier about -- and I said this at the end of last year. I thought you had a better year than the numbers said. 13 points, 8.5 rebounds, because you were getting double-teamed all the time. How much better is it going to be for you this year now that you have guys back and guys that can shoot?

N'FALY DANTE: It will be great to get some help. Jermaine was out, Keeshawn was out, like Coach said. This guy next to me is going to help me a lot. If they want to double-team, go ahead. We're going to have fun.

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