

Pac-12 Conference Men's Basketball Media Day

Wednesday, October 11, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

UCLA Bruins

Mick Cronin

Adem Bona

Lazar Stefanovic



Q. It is PAC-12 Media Day from Las Vegas. As we continue, it's great to talk Bruins with UCLA Head Coach Mick Cronin. Good to see you. Give us a sense -- a lot of change. We'll get to learn about your team. How do you feel about the group?

MICK CRONIN: I'll give you 200 if you can pronounce everybody's game right.

Q. Berke.

MICK CRONIN: No. See, we're already done. You already lost.

Q. Aday.

MICK CRONIN: Aday is correct.

Q. Aday Mara.

Q. Berke.

MICK CRONIN: That's correct.

Q. How are you on the pronunciations?

MICK CRONIN: I'm good. I'm good. My problem is at times I speak Spanish to Berke, who has to tell me he doesn't speak Spanish.

Q. In what language does he tell you that?

MICK CRONIN: English. They all speak English. But when I need to emphasize a few things to Aday, I give them to him in Spanish, so he knows I'm being really serious. No, it's a comedy zone at times, but it's been great. You know, Tyger and Jaime and David aren't walking through that door. So it's time to turn the page.

But we got talent. We got depth. We're just young, and I know we're an unknown to a lot of people. So it's going to be interesting. Don has seen us practice.

Q. I have. And it's interesting. Because Tyger and Jaime and that group did so much, I think it's worth revisiting before you move on to this season, for us at least. How are you coaching differently with this young group versus having all that experience, it seems like, for so long with those other guys?

MICK CRONIN: Well, a lot more teaching. The obvious thing, a lot more teaching. Team bonding, we went to Spain this summer as a group. We gotta get these guys to realize -- I know this sounds weird, but they're a team. They're going to decide whether we win or lose. Tyger is not going to show up and save the day. And Jaime plays for the Heat.

So that's a big piece of it. With the young guys, we do have veterans. And like, you know, last year it was different. My approach really failed in the end last year because it was a just get healthy, in all seriousness. Whether you're one or two seed, I thought we can win it all. But you gotta be healthy. Like you're not -- the Clippers got no chance without Paul George and Kawhi Leonard. You can talk all you want about all this other stuff. So we tried to be healthy going into the NCAA Tournament last year and failed miserably, with Jalen and Adem going down. So that really defined the end of our season. But this year, look, we're going to have to get better as we go. We just gotta get experience, get better as we go and make adjustments as we go. You have to adjust as a coach.

Q. Mick, Tommy Woods said that you two talked about maintaining that rivalry. How important would that be to you and how important would it be to maintain other West Coast rivalries?

MICK CRONIN: Well, I think the big key is for college basketball is that we can continue to focus on what's best for college basketball, which has been obviously very hard to do with football and football television money deciding our fate. So I think what concerns me is as I hear talk of



even going past 20 league games, you know, it's already tough enough with the rivalry stuff that you lose with these conferences and all the stuff that's gone on. So the question for me, I don't even know where we're headed next year. I don't know -- am I going to be mandated 21 league games plus two more games and challenge -- I mean, right now it's a lot of not knowing for us, and I'm sure Arizona is in the same position with that. But things that are good for college basketball are big, non-league games. I think there's no doubt about that. And we've all been shown in the past we're willing to do it.

We went to Maryland last year. We played Kentucky in New York. So I just think we gotta have opportunity, though. I get concerned about the constraints of the big conferences and where it's all headed, because I think where does it end is the question.

Q. Maryland comes to you this year?

MICK CRONIN: Correct.

Q. So let's talk about your schedule, Ohio State, Villanova, Marquette. You'll go to Honolulu as well. What do you think of your nonconference schedule?

MICK CRONIN: Well, if you look at the eight teams in Maui, it's scary. It's good you don't have to play everybody, because it's murderer's row. We're going to practice being in the BIG TEN. We gotta go play Ohio State in Atlanta, come home, finals, go back, play Villanova, and then Maryland comes to us. So we're going to probably play six really, really tough games amongst -- then you got 20 more. So you never know, though.

Like when you're scheduling these games out, you used to kind of know who's going to be on what team. With the transfer portal, who knows. I mean you don't even know as you schedule games, the so-called bye games. You schedule a game right now. We talked to somebody yesterday about an opener for next year. That guy could go out and get nine transfers and be awesome. So it makes scheduling much more tougher. We all like to know what we're getting into.

Q. Going back to Tyger, Mick, and what a luxury for you for four years.

MICK CRONIN: Oh, yeah.

Q. One of the biggest compliments I've heard around our league in the last few years was other coaches in the league saying, I want my point guard to be more like Tyger Campbell. The reason I bring that up is Dylan Andrews is now getting into that role. How

much did he learn last year playing kind of underneath Tyger, and how much are you having to coach him up to try and get him to play a lot like Tyger?

MICK CRONIN: Yeah, I think that's what you gotta avoid. I can't ask Dylan to be Tyger. I think Dylan's got different strengths. And I think I gotta make sure that I'm allowing him to be really good at what he's good at, pressuring the ball, using his speed and quickness, being able to create his own shot, probably better off the dribble than Tyger.

Obviously very few guys run a team as well as Tyger Campbell. That's why coaches loved him so much, as you know. So there's things he's gotta get better at as far as running a team. But, again, I think I gotta make sure that I try to let him flourish at what he's good at.

Q. I guess the reason, like I said, too, though, is turnovers is such a big thing.

MICK CRONIN: For me.

Q. For you, yeah. He's different than Tyger. Physically. But like to just get that mentality of I need -- I'm not turning it over basically.

MICK CRONIN: Yeah, and you've seen us practice quite a bit. So you know how I am with that. The only chart on the wall during practice is the turnover chart. So you just can't win if you don't take care of the ball. You're not going to beat quality opponents if you don't take care of the ball, and you'll never win on the road if you don't take care of the ball. It's not just Dylan, Jan Vide, Sebastian Mack. We have a lot of young guards. Will McClendon is going to surprise a lot of people this year, as you saw in practice. So I think the general consensus to all the guys, when you have all these guys that haven't played a lot together is, for us on offense, you have to take care of the ball. Then you get a shot off. It might go in. High probability if it was you, but it might go in. You might get fouled. You might get a rebound. But if you throw it away, you got no chance. And, you know, look, analytics is real. You get 20 more shots than the other team and shoot 10 more free throws, your chances of winning are pretty good. It's not going to happen if you turn it over. And we try to create turnovers. So analytically, we try to win that margin of possession in every game.

Q. Given how good you've been on defense, how do you get a young team to play defense the way you want them to play defense? Do you have to change your expectations?

MICK CRONIN: Well, you start with Adem Bona, you got a good shot. You can go back to analytics. He was Top 2

player, plus-minus guy, efficiency guy in the country last year. We were like plus-30 points or more with him in the game. Yeah. So, you know, I like our chances. Jaylen Clark going down was brutal; Adem went down, it was over, for us, as far as winning, hanging the 12th banner. I like our chances, if he would have still been healthy, to be honest with you. So you start with him you got a pretty good defense, because not only can he anchor the middle, he can defend the perimeter. And his energy level was never an issue, never an issue. So Don's been training guys for the NBA Draft since his career, and a lot of guys you have to train them just how to play hard, how to practice hard. You never have that issue with Adem Bona. And his energy is infectious, which helps your defense.

Q. When you have a younger team, though, Mick, do you have to simplify the defensive game plan?

MICK CRONIN: Yeah. No question about it. No question about it. We don't really complicate it too much other than when we get to the scouting report. That'll be the issue, you know, basics, things you're trying to take away from a team. But if you can't take away a team's strengths, they're going to score on you. If you let a team get it to who they want when they want, they're going to probably score. You gotta try to take something away and make a team play in a style they're not comfortable playing, whatever their style is, or you're not going to be a good defensive team. But it's going to be a challenge. You know, I think simple is for all our young guys has been really the theme of our fall. But you gotta be good at it. It's not just simple -- don't mistake me. It's like you gotta build toughness before you have any chance. But you gotta get good at something. Okay. So if you can't pressure the ball, you gotta stay in front of the ball, or you can't play. You gotta understand, like that's not a joke. Like you won't play because you don't score the ball as well as Don MacLean did or Tracy Murray did, or Jaime Jaquez did.

Q. So I know it's hard for coaches because you play zero-sum game, wins and losses, but you and I talked before and after your practice last week. How hard is it going to be for you to be patient, because it really looks like this team may stumble a little bit early, but by February you're probably going to be pretty good.

MICK CRONIN: We got a chance. We have some guys with some real talent. Just gotta get them experience. You just gotta make sure you're constantly teaching. And I think you're right, as a coach -- the pro coaches got no problem with it. They just go out to eat. They play 82 games. For me, a loss is death. Literally like I can't eat; I can't function. I can't speak to people, you know. So everybody that loves me knows they hide from me. So, you know, I'm going to have to make sure that we

understand that there's going to be just a growth process.

We went through it last year. We came here to Vegas and lost two. We were starting two freshmen. We weren't a good defensive team early in the season. We came in here, gave 79, gave up 80 lost two games. Then I think we won 14 straight after that. But it does make you better sometimes, because you have to look in the mirror -- at not just players. I'm talking about as a coach and say, okay, we gotta do something here, make a change, somehow and it may be getting more simple, Don.

Q. We're going to bring your players up in a second. You gave us your thoughts on Adem Bona. Could you give us your thoughts on Lazar Stefanovic?

MICK CRONIN: When you have so many freshmen, it's so nice to have somebody that's always in the right spot and is extremely smart, has been really well coached, that can really help the young guys. So, now, he's such a good guy, and he's trying to fit in at UCLA, that I'm trying to make sure he understands -- I whisper to him in practice, since Lazar doesn't know, Don, you scored 2608 -- 2,608 points, the leading scorer ever in the PAC-12. But nobody ever had to do this to Don. But I have to go over every now and then and whisper to him, you know, you gotta be aggressive, you gotta look to score. Because you can't worry about being a transfer. You can't worry about fitting in. We don't have time for that stuff. So I want him to know, you know, that I have confidence in him, and he's gotta get comfortable quickly on this team, because obviously we need his leadership.

Q. Coach, we appreciate your time. Good luck this year. We'll let you jump out and we'll talk to your players.

MICK CRONIN: You got it.

Q. Guys, welcome. I was going to start, Adem, by asking how your shoulder is doing, but I saw you swinging a golf club at the hitting bay around the corner. So looks like you're doing okay.

ADEM BONA: Yeah. I'm doing good. It's been a while working with the team, the UCLA trainers. I think they've been getting me right.

Q. I assure you, I took a good look at that swing. Don't show the doctors the video of you swinging a golf club right now.

ADEM BONA: Yeah, we're going to hide that.

Q. You heard what coach said Lazar about you

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coming in. Has it been a transition being an older guy, being a leader, but also being new?

LAZAR STEFANOVIC: Yeah. It's always, when you change a team you play for, there's new things that come with it. So it's great to hear what Coach said, and he does, surely tell me sometimes I need to be more aggressive, and I know it, and I know the team needs it. And I know that my leadership role is going to be huge for us this year, and I need to step up in that area and help everybody get better.

Q. I think one big thing for you, Lazar, is when you get into conference play on the road, yeah, you're new at UCLA, but you're not new to the league. You've been to all those places, and this team has got a lot of young guys that have never played in a conference, conference road game. So that leadership will be a big deal once you get into January?

LAZAR STEFANOVIC: Yeah, I think it starts now, and it already had to start before, because this period right now that we are in, it's a period the players usually don't like because it's a lot, a lot of practice, hard practices, long practices with no games. But it's the period where you get good enough to win games and have some fun in the season.

Q. Adem, how much were you able to do this summer with that shoulder? Like take us through your summer of what you were able to do, what you worked on and how you're going to be better this year.

ADEM BONA: I would say I had a long, successful summer, you know. I had to do the rehab. I would say like my dailies, like I wake up in the morning, getting with Tyler, getting my shoulder right, and I get on the court. We work on my form shooting on my one hand. Thankfully the injury was on my left shoulder. I was able to get in the gym a lot, work on my right hand, improve on my form. And I think the coaches have done a lot helping me get to where I am right now, and I think we've made a lot of strides.

Q. I think one thing that stood out to me about your team last year, Adem, was your improvement throughout the year. You started out, got in a lot of foul trouble early, but you cleaned that up, and not only that, offensively, you seemed as the season went on, you seemed to be more in the right places to like catch and finish, catch and dunk it. So what's the next step for you coming into this year? Obviously you're a terrific defensive player. Coach mentioned you can guard the rim and hedge ball screens showing, ball screens get out there. So what's kind of the next step for you? What are you looking to try and improve this

year?

ADEM BONA: I would say big thanks to the coaches that they helped me through any improvement for last year, which was a phase for me transition from high school to college, concerning my foul trouble is got better towards the end of the year playing with guys like Jaime and Tyger. They left the offensive burden off me be -- not burden. It's more on the offensive -- they kept the offense. But this year we don't have those guys. So I think my role is going to be big time this year on the team. I have guys like Lazar on the team to support me, young guys like Mara, Berke. So it's going to be huge step up for me offensively, and I think I'm ready to take the step.

Q. Guys, nice to see you. Adem, I know you're not fully cleared yet, but have you done any kind of like walk-through stuff with Aday and Coach says he wants to go two bigs this year. Have you kind of done any preliminary on-the-court work with him and seeing how that would go and how excited are you about that possibility?

ADEM BONA: Yeah. If you watch us in practice, you would have seen how excited I am. We have done a lot of walk-through together. We have watched a lot of film also together. Coach Savino is our bigs coach. He's taking us through some scenarios where we're going to be on the court at the same time, and I think Aday is a great guy. He can do so much on the basketball court, and I think me and him on the floor at the same time is going to be amazing to see, and I can't wait to have the two of us on the floor at the same time.

Q. Lazar, you're grinning listening to Adem talk. What's going through your mind?

LAZAR STEFANOVIC: Yeah, I agree with a lot of things he said. And I agree that Aday is going to help us win a lot of games this year, can help us win a lot of games. And I can't wait to see the two of them matched up at practice. But more so I can't wait to see them together on the court, how they play together.

Q. It's interesting, Adem, you're not an overly tall player, but you play like a taller player because of your activity and your effort. The league got big this year. The league -- I don't know how much you've looked at other teams around the PAC-12, but there's a lot of big teams in our league. So does that become more important for you to be even better defensively knowing that you got N'Faly Dante and Brandon Carlson, you got all these guys that are seven feet that can really play?

ADEM BONA: What's amazing, the league got big and we got bigger. We got big guys, we got Aday, Cremonesi, we got Berke, we got Jan, 6'5 point guard. I would say we got bigs also, and I'm always ready for the attacks, you know. I'm ready to step it up when it's needed. And I know I'm going to have to bring the team along with me. So have the same vision with the team as last year and the vision has never changed. We still have the same vision going for what we want and going all the way in.

Q. Do you feel different going from a young guy on the team who had a big role to being you're only a year older but you are in terms of experience one of the most experienced players now.

ADEM BONA: Yeah, it's a huge difference. We had guys like David, Tyger, Jaime. These guys were the leaders of the team. They've been there for a while. They know the ins and outs. And I feel like I'm so blessed. I'm lucky to play with those guys, and I've learned a lot, and I feel like I'm ready to carry on the torch from them to be able to pass it down to the young guys on the team right now.

Q. Lazar, how much better is it when practice is over walking out of the practice facility? Nothing against Salt Lake City.

LAZAR STEFANOVIC: Well, it's a little different when you walk outside it's always sunny, and it's very warm, you're always in your shorts and t-shirts. Yeah, Salt Lake is a beautiful place.

Q. It is.

LAZAR STEFANOVIC: I love that place, but LA, there's reasons why people love California and love Los Angeles, and especially that part where we are on. It feels good.

Q. Adem, how is Coach doing coaching all these young guys to play defense? Is it testing him a little bit do you think?

ADEM BONA: Yeah, I think it's a process. I think I kind of went through that process last year. I do play a lot of defense, but there's the little details, like obviously we spoke about my foul trouble last year. These guys know how to play the little habits. They love to play back when they're playing. I think it's a process coach has been on them trying to like get them to play the right way, the winning way. That's what we call it. I think coach has done a pretty good job getting them to play the right way.

Q. That's your job Adem when they make mistakes, you clean it up. Right?

ADEM BONA: Yeah. That's my job, but we're going to try and limit the mistakes.

Q. Guys, good luck this year.