

# Pac-12 Conference Men's Basketball Media Day

Wednesday, October 11, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

**Washington Huskies**

**Coach Mike Hopkins**

**Keion Brooks, Jr.**

**Sahvir Wheeler**



THE MODERATOR: We continue with the Washington Huskies. It's great to see Mike Hopkins.

**Q. Coach, we appreciate it. Give us a sense of how you feel about your team right now.**

MIKE HOPKINS: I feel really good about our team. It will be the first time since year 1 into year 2 where we returned -- at that time, we returned an all-league player, all-defensive player, all rookie.

This next year, Braxton, all-defense, Keion Brooks all-league, and we lost Keyon Menifield, but Koren Johnson was borderline. And put together a group of transfers, older experienced players, so I think we've got a great balanced unit.

**Q. Rumor on the street is you might be changing your strategy a little bit, that there may not be as much of the zone, that you'll go a little more man to man. Is that the case?**

MIKE HOPKINS: Yeah, we've been working on it. We had two possessions of zone in 12 weeks. We had 10 weeks of practices, 8 weeks until going up on our European Tour, and we've really tried to become better at man to man.

With that, there's a lot of learning. We're getting better, but a long way to go.

**Q. What was the breaking point -- not the breaking point, but what made you decide the zone is just not as good as we need it to be, so we need to try something else? What was kind of the decision there?**

MIKE HOPKINS: I think a big thing is the personnel that we got. Sahvir Wheeler is an elite defensive player, puts a lot of pressure on the ball. We've got great rim protection. We've got good size on the wings. So I think style. Just

wanted to play a little bit more up tempo, a little bit faster.

When you play the zone, a lot of teams can try to take away the clock. It still can be a good off-speed pitch because we've got some personnel to do it, but we want to be great at one thing, and I really believe we've got to put a lot of emphasis on that, and that's what we've done.

**Q. Development was been such a big part of Braxton Meah's career. Well, for everybody, but for him the jumps he's taken. What's the next jump for him?**

MIKE HOPKINS: Getting better in the man-to-man defense, in the zone like rim protection. Have to go out, go back, I'm right there.

Braxton is one of these guys, he averaged 3 a game before he got to us. He became such a big, physical presence in the paint for us. On offense he puts more pressure on the rim. He's athletic. He can catch lobs. He can play behind the defense. If he gets deep post position, you're in trouble. Then on top of that, he made foul shots.

For any big guy to make that, that was huge. I look for him to make the next step.

**Q. It's interesting because I did a lot of your games last year. Kepnang goes down. That gave Meah a big opportunity. So Meah probably doesn't progress the way he progressed if Kepnang doesn't get hurt. You probably would have been better last year had Kepnang not gotten hurt.**

MIKE HOPKINS: Yeah, both of them really -- to have two guys of that caliber was huge. Then we asked Braxton to be superman, and we asked him to play 39 minutes a game. They're going baseline to baseline, be the best defensive player on the team, don't get in foul trouble.

To play the way that we played, the luxury that we had -- if he got in foul trouble, we brought in Franck. So we never -- you still had rim protection. You could still be aggressive. We had to become less aggressive just to keep him out of foul trouble in a lot of ways, and that really hurt our defense for the most part.

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We're really excited for Franck coming back as well as the development Braxton was able to become the better player.

**Q. How is Franck?**

MIKE HOPKINS: He's been great. He's been progressing. There's obviously going to be some time when he's going to play, but he's out there doing stuff. You know him, he's a high energy, hard-playing dude. Just excited to have him back too.

**Q. Go back to Wheeler and how different -- Menifield was good as a freshman, but more of a scoring type guard, not a true point. Seems like Wheeler is more of a true 1.**

MIKE HOPKINS: He's as good of a point guard as I've seen coached. He makes everybody better. To be able to average over seven assists in a Power 5 league in the SEC, and his speed is different. He can get up and down the court as good as anybody. He's dependable.

As a coach, when you have a great quarterback, you can sit back a little bit, and you know it's in good hands. He's a great leader.

Last year we were, I think, 11th in the league in assist-to-turnover ratio. We had to improve. We were 12th in the league in three-point shooting or 11th. We had to improve that. I think with this roster we have.

**Q. You might have the two best quarterbacks in the country at Washington, are you saying?**

MIKE HOPKINS: On the football field is definitely the best quarterback. I don't know if there's anything better. That guy is amazing. He's like a magician out there. I just can't wait for the fans to see Sahvir Wheeler for us because he's an exciting player.

**Q. I remember coming last year and seeing Michael mid-court at your basketball game. We can ask the players. College Game Day is coming. Koren Johnson really looked unafraid last year. As the season wore on, he got more opportunity, it seemed like. What has been the development for him?**

MIKE HOPKINS: Same thing. He's a guy that's battled some injuries this summer, but a guy who's exceptionally confident. He can play both guard positions. We talked about that playing man to man. He's like, like Sahvir he's a very good on ball defender. He's very disruptive. He's quick. He's got great instincts. The way we want to play

up and down, he fits that.

Just like you were talking to Donny about Braxton's development, Koren was redshirted at the beginning of the year. With our injuries, was able to play, and then actually had some big games for us and got a lot of experience. So looking to carry over that experience.

**Q. If you are changing the offense, Hop, you talk about playing fast offensively. But with new personnel, I know you have a lot of guys coming back, but you do have a lot of new personnel as well. Any changes on the offensive end, like in terms of how you're going to approach it?**

MIKE HOPKINS: Yeah. Last year, you know, KenPom, we played the second-fastest pace in the league behind Arizona. The problem was we shot it at 31 percent from three, and we were 11th in the league in turnovers.

So you've got to play fast. But you've got to also be responsible. When you don't have it, you've got to be able to get us into a set.

But with the ability to beat teams down the court, the way that Braxton runs, the way that Sahvir pushes the ball, and getting guys like Keion Brooks in transition and Moses Wood, who can really shoot the ball, both those guys, major improvements. You're attacking not set defenses.

So we believe that's the best formula for us, and we've been looking pretty good at it.

**Q. Notice on your roster a lot of Kentucky. What's going on? What's your connection there? Three transfers from Kentucky on your roster.**

MIKE HOPKINS: You know what? Two, and we had -- a lot of times from my history, where I was, I recruited the players. When we were involved with Keion Brooks he was high school teammates, prep school teammates with Isaiah Stewart.

So in recruiting, a lot of it comes down to trust and opportunity. I thought that was big.

Then when Sahvir was available, he played with Keion Brooks at Kentucky, and it comes back to relationships. That's another thing too. Sometimes in the portal when you get a lot of guys that haven't played together, you're trying to build that. They already have a great relationship. They've played together. There's a mutual respect for each other and some chemistry.

So we've been able to have kind of a little bit more of a

cheat code in terms of putting this team together too.

**Q. Another Fresno State transfer too, just like Braxton, but six transfers in total. You talk about Wheeler, but how about the other five? What kind of impact do you foresee?**

MIKE HOPKINS: Moses Wood, I don't want to even say shooter because I think he's just a really good basketball player. I don't know if anybody ever saw this guy play, but everybody did. He could really shoot it and score. Moses can really shoot it.

When you see the three-point shot, he's an NBA-caliber shooter with great size. He has that feeling, knows his open spots, knows where to go.

Anthony Holland is a Swiss Army knife, a high-level defensive player. You know the Fresno State team, the great defensive teams. Been injured a little bit last year, but he can really shoot the basketball. You can hear me keep saying shooting. You can hear me say decision-making.

Wilhelm Breidenbach, Mater Dei. Able to finally get an MDHS guy. Been great additions, great positions, great chemistry.

**Q. What's going to happen for you, Hop, for you guys to get back in the upper half of the league? We talked about the offense and defense. What has to improve the most from last year to this year for you guys to really exceed expectations?**

MIKE HOPKINS: You know what, great question. I think we're making the transition defensively. Obviously in our championship level teams early on when we started and having our best teams, we had one of the top defenses. We were in the top four.

Then offensively, you can't shoot 31 percent from the three-point line and expect to win championships. You can't turn it over at a high rate and expect to win championships. So a big part of that was our roster development, and our staff did a great job of putting this roster together.

I think we've always had really good players. I don't think we've had a great combination of complementary talent, and I believe that this is one of the best rosters that we've had since the year we won it four years ago.

**Q. I got a fun one for you. Yesterday the conversation was going amongst the coaches about the WNBA and The Finals are here. Of course Kelly was vested with**

**Sabrina. In Vegas, the Plum-Dog, the all-time scoring leader. We talked earlier today about the weekend I was up there in Seattle. She was there attending that game. Do you keep an eye on the former women Huskies? And do you have a rooting interest, obviously, in the WNBA Finals?**

MIKE HOPKINS: Obviously Kelsey Plum is the GOAT. She's unbelievable. I love her Under Armour commercials. She's just different, watching how she approached the game. I wasn't around her, but I just met her when she came back. The love she had for Washington, the women and men, both programs, and just being a Husky in general, she's been very supportive.

I love hearing the stories of her competitiveness when she would play with our team. It was funny. That's what the great ones are, they're great competitors.

And Tina Langley, she's -- when you're around coaches that have -- take so much pride in their craft and really love their student-athletes, she's all about the right stuff. I love being her teammate. Like there's a lot of programs where those relationships are great.

I'm her biggest fan, and I know she's my biggest fan. We always share different things with each other. She's always there to help me. I'm just rooting for them.

**Q. We got your thoughts on Wheeler. As the players are about to come up, Keion Brooks, we're talking about one of the best players in the league, a quarter of your points last year. What comes to mind when you think of Keion?**

MIKE HOPKINS: Loyalty. He'll be one of the best players in the league this year. You watch.

THE MODERATOR: Let's bring in Sahvir Wheeler and Keion Brooks. Welcome, guys. Thank you.

**Q. How we doing? Still excited to be here?**

KEION BROOKS JR.: Absolutely.

**Q. Keion, it's clear you mean a lot to your coach.**

KEION BROOKS JR.: Yeah, and he means a lot to me. I like to think we came into each other's lives at the perfect time. I needed him to continue to help build me back up as a player, and I feel like I helped him in some ways as well.

So I just feel like our relationship is very strong. I'll do anything for Coach Hop. I'll run through a brick wall for the man. I really love him, and he's been great with helping

me develop and continue to get better as a player, but even more as a man.

**Q. Most refreshing thing I've heard and seen today was that exchange right there. In this day and age of guys leaving for the wrong reasons, finding reasons to leave, having excuses why they need to leave, you stayed, and that's why you got the reaction from the coach. You know what happens when that happens? Good things happen. So I wouldn't be surprised if you have -- you had a great year last year, but an even better year this year based on that, because when you can have a relationship that's built on loyalty and commitment, usually better things happen. So I'm happy for you, Keion, that that's the case with you and Hop. How's practice been so far for you guys? You got guys returning, but you got a lot of new guys in here too.**

KEION BROOKS JR.: Practice has been amazing. We have a veteran group, a lot of guys that are older and know what it takes to win games. But at the same time, having a lot of new guys, you've got to work out the kinks. I think we've been doing a great job of that.

Our coaching staff has done an amazing job of challenging us to where not everything is easy every day. Practices are highly competitive. We've got two really good groups of one 5 and another 5, so it's not like one group is beating up on the other one every day.

It's been really good with both of the groups competing and challenging each other.

**Q. Sahvir, Hop told us what you bring to the table. I want to hear from you what you bring to the table.**

SAHVIR WHEELER: Man, I think, first and foremost, I think I'm a guy that's going to bring a smile to a lot of people's faces when I walk in the room. Being the oldest, eldest of six kids, I kind of have that personality trait where I can kind of sense who needs it, and I think I bring that.

I think I bring a leadership, a leadership role, having some experience in college basketball. I've been to a couple different universities, knowing what it takes to win and what doesn't win.

From a player standpoint, I think I'm the ultimate playmaker. I think I'm a guy who's more than capable and more than happy and willing to be the point guard who has two points, five rebounds, ten assists, if that's the case for us to win.

Also on the flip side, be the guy that can score 20 points on

any occasion.

**Q. That being said -- and your numbers speak to that -- this is your third stop. How hard is it to come into -- if you are that guy to come into a situation to recognize personnel and then be able to figure out, okay, this is where the ball needs to go, this is where it needs to go with a brand new team. How long does it take to kind of figure that out?**

SAHVIR WHEELER: Yeah, like you mentioned, it is my third stop, but kind of like in reality it hasn't been a team where I kind of had that continuation of multiple players.

Like at Georgia, our freshman year, we had Ant and a had a whole bunch of seniors. They left. So my sophomore year was a new year.

I transferred to Kentucky, and you know at Kentucky it's never two of the same team.

So I think the biggest thing is building camaraderie off the court, like getting to know who you're playing with, getting to know who's your roommate, getting to know who's the guy next to you in the locker room, because if you can build trust with them off the court, that irons out a lot of stuff on the court.

So when you do run into some conflict, they know that you're coming from a place of love. Man, I care for you, man. This is what is going to be best for us as a team.

**Q. Sahvir, you're new to this, but Keion, you know. I had your game last year at Arizona, where you guys only lost by a possession. I see you shaking your head. You know that one got away. So now that you are introducing a new defensive philosophy, do you think playing man to man is going to help you this season to win those kind of close matchups?**

KEION BROOKS JR.: Yes, I do. I think it's good for us to be able to throw different things at teams. We're still going to play our zone here and there, but I think playing man to man really highlights the kind of team that we have, and we have really good guards that can get into the ball and make it hard for the ball handler, for them to get into their offense.

Then behind them, we have a lot of length, a lot of IQ, a lot of switchability between all of our wings and our guards. So I think when there's times when we need to kind of make teams uncomfortable and shake things up, our man to man defense is really going to aid in that.

**Q. Keion, what's the priority for -- what was the**



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**priority for you this summer? You had a really good year last year, as I mentioned, some things you could be better at. What was your approach heading into the summer, and where do you think you're at now with that stuff?**

KEION BROOKS JR.: I think the biggest thing for me was, as people know, as people have seen, I have a knack for being able to score the ball, but with that being said, my team is going to rely on me to make plays, I have to cut down on my turnovers. I had way too many of those last year.

Granted, I was put in a position I hadn't been in in a long time, but that's no excuse for how many times I gave the ball to the other team. That's hard to guard.

Then beyond that, continuing to develop my three-point shot and my playmaking. I understand I'm going to be the top of the scout, teams are going to try to take me away and load up on me. So when that does happen, I've got to be able to deliver on time and on target passes to my teammates so they're in a position to score as well.

**Q. One of the things you're really good at, like really good in the sense that I probably in the last five years at least haven't seen a guy drawing fouls in isolation situations, in that mid post area you like to operate. With seemingly a better roster this year, do you think that approach changes at all, where instead of going into the defense, looking for the foul, trying to get to the foul line, now I'm drawing defenders and trying to find other teammates? Or is it a balance of both, trying to do both?**

KEION BROOKS JR.: Exactly. It's a balance of both. I don't want to lose my aggression and putting pressure on the defense, because I know when I'm attacking and relentless getting to my spots I'm a lot to deal with. So I don't want to get away from that.

But at the same time, when I do draw the extra defender or if I do see somebody falling asleep because they're just watching me with the ball, I know that I've put a lot of work into being able to get the ball to my teammates because, like I said, it's all a respect thing.

So if they're not respecting my teammates, you're going to die because got to keep your eyes open, got to guard everybody.

**Q. You guys played together at Kentucky. Sahvir, to what degree did that relationship, knowing Keion, factor into you coming to Washington?**

SAHVIR WHEELER: A lot. Let's not act like it wasn't a factor. When I entered the portal originally, I think I texted Keion with just some eye emojis. At first it was just like a couple back and forth, like, man, are you playing? I'm like, no. For real. What's up? Tell Coach Hop to hit me up and see if this is going to be the best fit for me.

When they made that decision to come down and we visited, had a conversation with the whole coaching staff and continued to talk with Keion and even some of the players on text message, DMs, I felt like it was just the best opportunity for me and the best fit for me.

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