

Pac-12 Conference Men's Basketball Media Day

Wednesday, October 11, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Washington State Cougars

Coach Kyle Smith

Andrej Jakimovski

Joseph Yesufu



got the freshmen and the transfers. How is that all going to fit together with the newcomers this year?

KYLE SMITH: I'm trying to figure it out (laughter). No, like I said, we have three post players, I think, that are inexperienced at this level but good talents. Isaac Jones, good transfer from Idaho. Very good scorer. Can score inside and out. Good size and length.

Oscar Cluff, who's a junior college transfer. Very good low post player. Kind of a throwback. I don't want to put the Jokic thing on, but he's really a passer, good and nimble.

And Ruben Chinyelu, who's a freshman from UVA academy. Has just got a big, big strong, long athlete with a big heart and really plays hard.

So they all kind of complement each other, and I think, as we learn to play through those guys, that's how good we'll be.

Q. And you also brought in a high level guard from a championship program in Kansas?

KYLE SMITH: Absolutely. Great championship DNA in Joseph Yesufu, a guy we tried to get when he left Drake. Just wonderful. He really fits even more so with our attitude, as far as having a great attitude, great work ethic. He's a yes, sir, no, sir guy. Knows what it takes, so he's been in those battles.

We're going to lean hard on his maturity as much as anything.

Q. What kind of player is he, Kyle?

KYLE SMITH: He's an explosive combo. Right now he'll probably be at the point for us, but he can really guard the ball, he can really shoot it, and he can really get it going scoring-wise.

But we're going to need his premier shooting with the size I mentioned. Looks a little like, I don't know, but kind of like those UW kind of guards back in the day, the Isaiah, Nate Robinson type. He's a smaller, strong, explosive guy who

THE MODERATOR: We conclude Pac-12 men's basketball media day from Las Vegas with the head coach of the Washington State cougars, Kyle Smith. It's great to see you. Let's get a sense, how do you feel about your group right now?

KYLE SMITH: I really like our team. A lot of new faces. We've been doing it long enough, should have a decent pulse on what our talent feels like. I feel good about our talent. Really like our guys. You'll get to meet them in a second, a couple of them.

It's going to take a little time, probably because we have so much new, but I do feel good about them.

Q. How do you approach that, Kyle, when you lose that many players? It seems like everyone is dealing with it now. You're recruiting high school players on some level, but the portal becomes a big deal. Do you just go in there and try and replace it with best available, or do you try and build out a team in the portal? You know what I'm saying?

KYLE SMITH: Absolutely. I think it's a little bit of both. I think when we first arrived to Washington State and -- this will be our fifth year. The first approach obviously is get the best talent, like NBA GMs, we've got to get the best players and shape how we play accordingly.

Then we've built something, and we've been good inside. I think our good big talents, whether Efe, Mouhamed, DaShaun, others, I think attract others. We have a good core front group.

So we'll continue down that path. And we've just got to pick and choose where they come from a little bit. Just got to be nimble.

Q. To what degree -- we can go through some. You've



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can get buckets.

Q. I know obviously the Myles Rice battle with Hodgkins Lymphoma was something that we, as much as we can have followed. How is he doing?

KYLE SMITH: He's doing great. I was just telling people I forget about it because of his attitude. He's such a life-giving force, anyone that's met him. He's really positive, optimistic through all of that. He's been out for two years, and he's very talented. Just needs to let him grow a little bit, let him feel himself and get going.

Q. What was his timeline? How long has he been back on the court?

KYLE SMITH: He's been back on the court since the summer. I can't quite remember, but I think he's been -- as I said, I can't remember. We're worried, like coaching him on eggshells and doing conditioning like we're worried about him, but after a couple of weeks, he's fine physically.

Physically, it hasn't been an issue that's noticeable other than just two years of rust. I think mentally as much as anything, it's just him getting back in the saddle.

Q. Jakimovski is back senior year. Had to play a lot bigger than he should have or was used to last year. Talk about him going back to kind of being who he was when he got to Washington State?

KYLE SMITH: He hasn't really been healthy for us one year. He hurt his groin his freshman year, had a surgery that went into his sophomore year, then last year he was dealing with the turf toe.

He's just a stud. He's just gotten better as far as attitude, his confidence, and now he does move more, play more small forward, like I said.

It will probably be him, Jones, and one of the big 5s, and that's what I think will be our strength. He gives you a presence at the 3. I think he had 16, 17 rebounds against UW last year. He can bang threes.

His ball handling, we'll be able to play through him a little more like that as a perimeter guy, by I think is again -- we'll be big.

Q. What's the new -- I don't want you to give away any secrets, I know you want, but what's the new data this year? What did you guys uncover?

KYLE SMITH: My new data, it's like putting together a junior college teams, so I'm leaning hard into Jim Shaw,

who's recruited a lot of junior college. It's not about data as much as we've got to get this put together quickly. It's going to take some time.

Normally we let the data chase the data, who should be playing out there. Like I said, we've got to reprogram, get it in quickly, and hopefully return as much every year, but you never know.

Q. Do you have to simplify things in that?

KYLE SMITH: I think so. I think that's been the challenge for me. I think my 'druthers -- it doesn't matter anymore. But it would be like you can get really good at a place like in Pullman or Washington State, you've got guys playing together two, three, four years, anyone would, and that's not really the case.

There's been a lot of guys that I would have said the same about -- Mark Few, Gonzaga -- but then I don't know. Plug and play. They keep it pretty good. It's more about you've got to adjust and figure it out.

Q. Back to back postseasons for this group, which is significant to go to the NIT two years in a row. We've seen some of the net rankings, the schedules, like you've got that pretty dialed. What does it take in this deep league this year to get to the NCAA Tournament?

KYLE SMITH: I think that's the next step for our program. Like I said, we were trying to build and obviously had some setbacks, lose some guys, but if we're ever going to be good, you're going to have to get there.

The schedule, I think our league is going to be really good. I think you guys -- I know it's your job to promote it, but I just think just based on the talent that Cal's accumulated and making the jump, Oregon State is a year older and they've got good young players. Just the league top to bottom, and not to mention Arizona, USC is one of the best point guards in the country.

I think finish top half, let's do it. Top half should get it. Let's get six teams in.

Q. Here's my concern, Kyle. I agree with you. I think the league's going to be very good this year, but I think the league's going to be very good in January. I think there's a lot of teams like yours that a lot of new pieces, a lot of new stuff that, by the time you get to January, you're going to be much better. But we also know how important November and December are. In your net, in the league's NET, in all that, so that you have a lot of teams in contention for an NCAA Tournament. I just hope that all you guys in your team

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and some others don't stumble in November and December trying to figure it out because you have all these new pieces.

KYLE SMITH: I agree. As I said, that's a challenge for us. I think one thing that I think will help, it helped my mindset, we're not preparing for two league games two weeks in the season.

That changes the way you do things a little bit. Those games really -- they're all meaningful, but you're building this thing and trying to get there and have to do that. Definitely, we have to do our job out of league or, you're right, it doesn't mean much. I just think it will happen. I think the talent's good. The coaching's good.

We'll see.

Q. What do you think of your schedule, the nonconference schedule?

KYLE SMITH: Nonconference, I like it, a lot of home games, to be honest. In the sense that we're losing a lot of guys, to be honest. We want to make sure we're getting our one foot in front of the other, make sure we're building that way.

Last year I thought, had we stayed healthy, we probably bit off a little more than we could chew on the nonconference, but healthy was the right move. I think, if we had one or two more wins, that's all it would have taken and we're an NCAA Tournament team by the NET.

This team probably needs just a little patience earlier. Hopefully we can get it up quicker than that and do our best in the league.

Q. Get better while you're still winning.

KYLE SMITH: You've got to win. Winning is a great teacher.

Q. We know on the women's side for Coach E, it's Charlisse Leger-Walker, she is the straw that stirs the drink. Who is that player on your roster?

KYLE SMITH: Yet to be determined, but I do think Joseph Yesufu is really important to us because he can score, he can lead. He's been in a winning program.

I think Isaac Jones would have the best chance to be our leading scorer.

And I think Andrej Jakimovski with his leadership -- and he's capable to do it all, all-around guy -- with his

experience he's going to help lead this group.

And we'll be good at the 5, I think. There's going to be two of them there that are pretty good.

Q. You mentioned the experience of Yesufu coming from Kansas. How does that show itself at this time of the year early, before you've even started playing games in practice?

KYLE SMITH: Just the way he approaches practice, he's a pro. He's got a confidence about him, like how you do internal leadership audits with your team and players, part of the analytics. Very quickly, he had a lot of votes for leadership from the players.

That's hard. Especially I think it's a testament to our group. They understand what it's about. Look, he has that natural type leadership ability.

Q. That's obviously stuff for you coaches, but do the players really buy into that stuff?

KYLE SMITH: The analytic piece?

Q. Yes.

KYLE SMITH: Yeah, I think they do. They really do. I think our attitude's good. They're probably too compliant at times. But just an idea that they definitely buy into what they vote on. When they say it's their leader, they're telling me who it is, and it's nice when you feel like, I really like this guy is about the right stuff, and you get that feedback from your players they see the same things we do. It's not always like that.

Q. So leadership is an analytic, you're saying? The data you get from the surveys?

KYLE SMITH: Absolutely. I'm just saying that part of analytics is, hey, this guy scores very high, let's follow that lead. Our players are telling us to follow him and we like him, let's go.

THE MODERATOR: Your guys are coming up right now. We're looking forward to seeing them and looking forward to seeing you this year.

Andrej Jakimovski, Joseph Yesufu coming in. Welcome, guys.

Q. You guys got the tights on. You're ready to go.

JOSEPH YESUFU: Definitely. We're ready to play.

Q. Joseph, how is life acclimating to a new place? What's Washington State like for you?

JOSEPH YESUFU: I love Pullman. They welcomed me with open arms. Very peaceful area. You might think it's boring, but I need that peace.

Q. What's it been like welcoming him to the team?

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: It's amazing. I think he's an experienced guy. He's an NCAA champion. He's been to a tournament multiple times. I think we needed that kind of player in the previous years, and I think his experience is going to help us a lot this year.

Q. Where are at health-wise right now, Andrej? Coach was talking about how you feel like you've dealt with something nagging every year you've been at Washington State. How is your health right now?

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: I'm fully healthy. That was my main thing coming this off-season, and I've been working hard in the gym, in the training room just to try to get fully healthy and be ready to play a full season.

Q. Joseph, we haven't seen you play. We saw you play at Kansas, but we haven't seen you in a much bigger role, which you'll have, which in reading about you, you had at drake and not as big of a role at Kansas. You're going back to a much larger role. What can we expect from you? What do you bring to the table?

JOSEPH YESUFU: First of all, this is all a blessing. Coach Smith took a chance on me. What you guys can expect from me, you're going to see a different me, a better Drake version.

Q. A better Drake version?

JOSEPH YESUFU: A better Drake version.

Q. What does that mean in terms of we talk about shooting percentages, more assists? What are we talking about?

JOSEPH YESUFU: Just everything. I've been in college for about to be five years now. I learned a lot along the way from guys at Kansas, guys at Drake. This is my opportunity, and I'm blessed to be around a group of guys that believe in me.

Q. What have you learned about yourself in those five years?

JOSEPH YESUFU: I'm a leader. My freshman year I was quiet. I come off as a quiet person, but as I continue to grow, just leading, talking, just encouraging others around me.

Q. Andrej, you've been around for a while now. A lot of roster turnover, a lot of new guys this year. How much responsibility do you feel to kind of set the tone and show by example all these new players in the program?

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: I'm trying to be the leader of the team. I'm trying to lead this team because I've been through three different years, three different teams.

Our team this year is completely different because we got nine new players, and I think the Coach Smith and coaching staff, they did a great job putting every piece together. We're just trying to get better every single day.

Q. You know what it takes to play in this league. We were talking to Coach about the back-to-back NIT teams you've been a part of, and he said, well, this league is so deep, if you're in the top six, that's probably enough to be an NCAA Tournament team this year. What does it take to win enough games to be in the top half of the Pac-12 from your experience?

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: I think the main thing is the chemistry of the team, and I feel like with this group we have the best chemistry that I've been around. We like each other. We like to hang out with each other off the court, on the court. We like to help each other.

I think that's going to help to make one more step and to make it to the NCAA Tournament.

Q. You said we can expect a leader in you. You've transferred before into a new program. Now you transfer. How do you go about sort of finding a happy medium? Maybe not stepping on toes and coming in and trying to aggressively become a leader, but also respect who's already maybe in that role and blend yourself in and then add your experience. Have you already built that chemistry? Are you still working on it? Where are you with that, and how do you plan to do it as the season starts?

JOSEPH YESUFU: First it comes from guys like Jak and teammates welcome me in with open arms. That's a credit to them. I really love them for that.

And just being me. I feel like I have a great personality. And also getting to know my teammates, talk to them every day, text them every day, going out with them, doing like

activities, bowling, stuff like that. So I feel like building a relationship with my teammates has been the number one thing for me.

Q. What's the name of the bowling alley?

JOSEPH YESUFU: Zeppo's.

Q. He said he has a great personality. What do you love about his personality?

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: He's just a positive guy. I like his approach to every practice. We're seeing him like every day, and he just is trying to be positive, trying to teach the young guys. We have a lot of freshmen coming in, especially the point guard positions, and he's trying to help them develop their game. I think that's the best thing about Joe.

Q. Speaking of approach, what kind of team are we going to see this year? Play fast? Play slow? Physical? What kind of team are we going to see?

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: I would say physical because, like Coach Smith said, we're a different team than last year. I think we're going to play bigger. We have big forwards. Probably I will play more as a 3 than 4 from last year.

We can play fast. We can play slow. But I think the physicality is the main thing of this team.

Q. Either of you guys are comfortable -- Andrej, obviously you played so much in Europe and here, but the team has changed each year. It hasn't been that long, with piggybacking on what Donny just said, how do you feel about this team right now? What have you seen in practice, either of you guys? This is your third school. You've played so much in Europe and here. What do you see that you like about this team so far?

JOSEPH YESUFU: What I see is no one hangs their heads. They miss a shot, they're going to shoot the next one. I feel like we're a very positive team, very confident team, and we're going to work together. I haven't seen like a lot of teams I've been part of in the past, it takes a while for us to gel, but this team, I feel like we're gelling really well.

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: I agree with him, but I just think that we need to be patient because, like you said, we're a new team. Our coaches are huge on hustle stats and all the analytics, and they need a little bit of time to just learn all those things.

But we got nice guys on and off the court, and that's the

one thing that I like about this team.

Q. You guys know, Andrej you know for sure how passionate the fan base is. Joseph, you're going to learn real quick. And it's a fan base that includes four-time NBA champion Klay Thompson. He is always watching. What is it like playing, knowing that?

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: It's amazing. Like he said, we are known as, we feel, underdogs, and we are just stick to that. We like being underdogs. We like that he's supporting us. It means a lot.

I think he came to watch us a couple games last year, and he's just amazing. Before coming to WSU, before being committed to WSU, when I went on a visit, he was the first person welcoming me because I was there for his jersey retirement. It was just an unbelievable experience for me.

Before, I would just watch YouTube videos, and now I'm talking with him. Definitely he played a huge part of the decision to come to WSU.

Q. He was yelling at the refs that day from his courtside seat. He just went to a football game. Did he stop by and see you guys at the football game?

ANDREJ JAKIMOVSKI: Yes.

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