

Pac-12 Conference Men's Basketball Media Day

Wednesday, October 11, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

USC Trojans

Andy Enfield

Boogie Ellis

Kobe Johnson



you. We'd love to hear, what are your thoughts? A lot of headlines around the Trojans, obviously, as is the case. So how are things coming together for you?

ANDY ENFIELD: Well, we're really excited for our basketball team. Great mix of experience, players that have been in a lot of big games. Very talented freshmen class. This is our most athletic and fast with speed. Should play a lot faster this year than we have because of our speed and athleticism.

Q. You might have one of the best back courts in the country, too, with Collier and Ellis. Talk about those two and what you've seen so far them playing together. Boogie was your leading scorer last year, but had to have the ball in his hands some. With Collier in there, seems like he might be able to play off the ball a little more.

ANDY ENFIELD: Boogie and Isaiah Collier are great. They complement each other very well. Boogie is a natural scorer, but he's come a long way in his decision making, and he's a really tremendous lead guard right now. He's really improved, had a tremendous trip to Greece and Croatia in August where he had 7:1 assist-to-turn ratio. And Isaiah Collier is very fast and athletic and what a tremendous passer with tremendous court vision. So I think those two in the back court together are very dynamic as a tandem.

Q. We know Bronny had the health issue, the cardiac arrest in July. How is Bronny doing?

ANDY ENFIELD: He's doing well. I think at the appropriate time the James family will give further updates. As LeBron stated last week at media day, things were progressing, and under any medical condition, we respect the privacy of the young man. But I think everybody is very supportive and hoping he gets back quickly.

Q. What about Iwuchukwu? Do you have an update on him and his progression from this summer?

ANDY ENFIELD: Vince is feeling great, probably the best he's ever felt physically, and we expect him to play a full season. We're excited to get him on the court.

Q. I think you look up, and we'll see Boogie Ellis in here soon, but in an era where things change a lot, and obviously Boogie had had some change in his career, but to be able to bring him back, what does that mean to your team?

ANDY ENFIELD: Well, he's our leading returning scorer, and he's come a long way, one of the most improved players we've ever coached at USC. The thing that's improved the best is his leadership skill, and he's a true leader of our team, and he's played in a lot of big games and had some great games for us last year to achieve the success that we did.

Q. You talked about the speed of this team, might be your most athletic team. Does that change your approach on either side, Andy? Obviously you said playing faster, but you guys have been really good defensively for a long time. Does it allow you when you have a more athletic team to do more or is it better just to simplify defensively because of the athleticism?

ANDY ENFIELD: I think man-to-man defense will be our primary, like it has been. I think we have the number one two-point field goal percent defense in the country over a four-year period the last four seasons. So our players know that stat. They have a lot to live up to. Every day in practice we remind them that defense helps us win games. The nights that you shoot 35 percent from the field, you still have to have a chance to win, and you do that by defending.

Everybody knows if they don't play hard on that side of the ball, they come out of the game and they might not go back in for a while. So we've had tremendous buy-in defensively over the years. We recruit size and length and shot blocking, and our wings are big, and we're athletic. So I

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think we can play multiple defenses. We can press a little bit, and our two-three zone that's been very effective for us in the past, Kobe a very effective of our guys, get to know the bumps and the defensive philosophy of a zone. But at the end of the day our man has to be the go-to.

Q. Kobe Johnson has proven himself as one of the best defenders in this league. He's here, so we'll hear from him as well. But what have you seen in his game from last season to this, you think?

ANDY ENFIELD: Kobe, to me, is the best defensive player in our league and possibly the United States. He's 6'6. He anticipates tremendously. Evan Mobley and De'Anthony Melton, who are both in the NBA right now, were our two best defenders and Jordan McLaughlin was pretty good, too, and he's in the League. But Kobe has that unusual ability to anticipate. He can gamble, but still be in position to recover at the same time. He gets a lot of deflections, a lot of steals, and he can guard big or small. So it's fun to watch him, and our players know that when he's guarding them in practice, it might be a long day.

Q. And you got big Joshua Morgan back, too. How much of a luxury is that to have his rim protection again this year? You talk about the two-point defense. That's a big reason why you guys challenge everything with your length. But to have that back line rim protector makes your defense even that much better.

ANDY ENFIELD: Yeah, Joshua led the league in blocked shots last year. I think he was Top 5 or 6 in the country, and combining Josh with Vincent Iwuchukwu, when Vince gets back, and our other big guys like Kijani Wright and Arrinten Page. We have a lot of size and athleticism. So we're looking forward to playing big, playing small, and Joshua has the ability to guard and switch on smaller even point guards to keep them in front of him with the cushion in his long arms.

Q. Arrinten Page, tell us about him. This is obviously a very highly touted class with Bronny and Isaiah Collier, but it seems like Arrinten Page could be an impact guy. You just mentioned him there. Do you expect him to make an impact quickly?

MICK CRONIN: Yes. Our freshmen class is terrific with Bronny, Isaiah Collier, Arrinten and Brandon Gardner, gives us incredible athleticism and length, and Arrinten is over 6'10 and very skilled. So we expect him to be -- and Chimezie Metu mold where he can play different positions inside and outside and really effect the game in a variety of ways.

Q. How did you schedule this year knowing you were

going to have you mentioned right off the top your balanced roster. You get veteran guys. You got good young players. You got athleticism. What was the approach to putting your schedule together this year?

ANDY ENFIELD: We have a very challenging league schedule because the PAC-12 is probably as good as it's been in many years. We knew our league schedule would be tough. But we decided to go out and get some national games. We open the season here in Las Vegas against Kansas State who went to the Elite 8 last year, come back to Vegas and play Gonzaga on December 2nd at MGM. And then we have a tough tournament with Oklahoma, Seton Hall and Iowa. And then we're playing at Auburn in December. So we have a lot of challenging games that could help our team prepare for the grueling PAC-12 schedule.

Q. What do you think will be the biggest -- most teams are better in January-February than they are in November. But what do you think -- what area do you think that will be for you guys? If you are better in something January-February, what area would that be?

ANDY ENFIELD: I think defensively we'll improve because with guys being out and not having the foreign tour, some of our key guys, once we get them in and get some experience, our four freshmen get some experience, I think it'll really help our overall depth. And I think we'll be a deeper team come January and February.

Q. DJ Rodman was a guy that played well against you last year obviously in the PAC-12. We've all seen him. He transfers in from Washington State, was one of the best players in the league defensively, really improved his three-point shot, was a winning player on the road. All these things that the second he went to USC I think it got everybody's attention. So how has he fit in and what do you expect from DJ Rodman this year?

ANDY ENFIELD: Well, DJ is a great fit for our team. He has no ego. He just wants to win. He does a lot of winning things. As you mentioned, he had over 30 charges on the defensive end last season, and he's not the rim protector as the guys -- so he's a great complement as a position defender. He's very skilled offensively, very smart player, and he can play with other good players, and I think he's just a tremendous asset to our team.

Q. Well, I think, as a guy who played in this league, when you look around this league, we saw Lazar Stefanovic in here with UCLA. He just played at Utah. We saw Pelle Larsson go to Arizona. Is in any way when you're coaching last year or the year before, are

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you watching guys going, is this a guy that could help us in the future? When you're playing nonconference games are you thinking that? Do you have to think that way differently versus the way you coached and scouted kind of college basketball in years past?

ANDY ENFIELD: Well, the transfer portal has certainly changed the game as far as recruiting goes. We try to develop freshmen and keep them in our program. We took one transfer this year, none last year and only one the year before. When Tahj Eaddy left, Boogie Ellis came. So we do it a little differently at USC. We try to stay out of the transfer portal. If we have to go there out of need, and then DJ was a need for us. We needed that position and that type of player. We assumed he would stay at Washington State. He's had a great career there. But then things change. So we don't really think about that as we're going through a season.

We respect other talented players and other teams, and when we played against a guy like DJ at Washington State for four years, we knew he was a very good player, and it was fun to watch his development because he's from California, and he's just such a great young man. So we appreciated the fact that he improved there. But once he did put his name in the portal, then, of course, we called him.

Q. Listening to you talk, Andy, for years it seemed like you had Okongwu and then the Mobley brothers. You were always big in playing through the bigs, and now it's different. I mentioned off the top you might have the best back court in the country. How does that change how you look at it and how you're going to approach the offensive end when you have maybe not the scoring bigs, you have the defensive bigs, but now your real punch comes from the back court?

ANDY ENFIELD: We played four guards last year. This year we have the option to play two bigs. We could put Vince out there with Josh and Kijani and AP, or we could go four guards. So it gives us versatility. When we have the bigger guys, sometimes you have to slow your tempo down to get them the ball in the low post. And people say, well, your tempo changes. Well, yeah, you try to get the ball to our best players and our leading scorers. So when you have Onyeka Okongwu and Isaiah Mobley, Evan Mobley, even Chavez Goodwin could score us back to the basket. Nick Rakocevic, we've had a lot of good bigs. Chimezie Metu in the NBA. So our philosophy is offensively we change it every year and tweak it based on our personnel. We have really fast guards. We have a lot of shooting. We have creativity in our back court. So we'll probably use that dynamic playmaking to our strengths hopefully.

Q. Guys, welcome. Did you just tell coach good job, Kobe?

KOBE JOHNSON: Absolutely.

Q. Because he calls you the best defender in America maybe?

KOBE JOHNSON: Absolutely. We support each other.

Q. Is that how you think of yourself, as the best defender in the league, the best defender in America?

KOBE JOHNSON: No doubt. I come out every game and guard the best players. So I see myself as the best defender.

Q. Expanding on that, we'll get to you in a second, Boogie, in Isaiah Collier, but it seems like, Kobe, no one is talking about you because of how highly rated Collier was and the year that Boogie had last year. We know you're going to guard. Is there a sense in your mind that people are going to be paying so much attention to these two that you might get even more opportunity on the offensive end this year?

KOBE JOHNSON: No, absolutely. Isaiah and Boogie, they're two highly great offensive players. So they're going to draw most of the attention from these teams this upcoming year, and I'm going to take advantage of that. I'm going to make teams focus on me a lot more as well. So as soon as teams start worrying about me, I'm going to make them pay for it.

Q. Boogie, how was your off season? What was the mindset in terms of building off of last year, heading into this year?

BOOGIE ELLIS: You know, just continuing to work. You know, that's the biggest thing for me. Just continue to work and continue to get better. So this off season got a little bit bigger. Continued to work on my game. And that's all it's about, continuing to get better.

Q. Any specific things you worked on? Like any finishes or improve your three-point percentage or anything like that?

BOOGIE ELLIS: I definitely worked on a lot of my finishing. I felt like I finished poorly last year around the rim. So that, and just watching a lot of film, making sure that I come back and I'm able to make my teammates better this year.

Q. When you say you feel like you finished poorly around the rim. Was that the way you felt? Did coach give you some statistical analysis to back that up?

BOOGIE ELLIS: I just felt that way.

Q. And was there anything as you kind of did some self-study, what did you put your finger on? What did you think in hindsight you were not doing as well as you could have?

BOOGIE ELLIS: Just finishing around the rim. I felt like if I could have finished a little bit better around the rim that I could have added at least more points a game doing that.

Q. You played with a unique player last year, the last couple of years in Drew Peterson, and now this Isaiah Collier comes in. Haven't seen him, but what do you think your role in terms of having the ball in your hands, creating for yourself, now that he's there? Do you think that's going to change and what have you seen so far in practice, the dynamic of you two playing together?

BOOGIE ELLIS: Definitely. I feel like we have the best back court in the country. So I feel like we play well together. He's one of my close friends. So on and off the court we have a great relationship, and he makes the guys around him better. He's going to make life for me a lot more easier. I don't have to score off the dribble so much. I get a lot more catch and shoots. So just having me and him pushing the ball we're going to play a lot faster, and I feel like we have an elite group of guards. Everybody's not talking about Kobe offensively, but he's a great offensive player as well. He's definitely made a jump, and you all will see that this year.

Q. What have you focused on offensively? How do you feel like you've made a jump, Kobe?

KOBE JOHNSON: Going into the summer, I knew I needed to work on my ball handling a lot more and just creating more for myself. Last year I was more just catch and shoot, just taking the opportunities that I was given, and I think this year I'll be able to create a lot more for not just myself, but for others.

Q. Kobe, you're such a good defensive player. And Andy was up here talking a lot about your defense and how much more athletic you guys are as a group this year. What have you seen in practice so far that leads you to believe that you guys could be -- and you guys have been really good defensively for a while now, but could be one of your better defensive teams this year?

KOBE JOHNSON: I think our length this year is going to be a lot more effective. Our incoming freshmen, they're long. They're hungry. They're ready to learn. So just being able to have them come in and just provide the extra length and the energy is going to be something that's very important. And then having Vince come back, that's a huge body to bring into the paint. So just being able to have a lot of people that are long and being active just throughout the course of the year it will be scary.

Q. Question, actually two-part. One for Boogie. Boogie, you're now a fifth year player in college basketball. You've had a really interesting and great growth journey through Memphis and now USC. I'm sure you've learned a lot of lessons about yourself, about who you are as a basketball player and who you are as a man. Can you maybe share some of those lessons as you look back on your career so far?

BOOGIE ELLIS: Yeah, definitely. You know, it's been a long journey for me, but I feel like coming to college, a lot of freshmen, they're worried about -- when I came into college, I was so worried about leaving college, trying to get to that next level. But I feel like, you know, it's about your journey and about getting better every day. In life there's ups and downs, and things like that. So you know, not everything is perfect. Everybody has their own journey. So I feel like things that I could tell freshmen out there, you know, just continue to work and trust the process and just -- your work will eventually show.

Q. Kobe, they've asked you a lot about your defensive capabilities, and I just want to know -- I was never a good defender, by the way. I was terrible at that. But what to you makes for a good defender, just in general? What makes elite defenders elite in your opinion?

KOBE JOHNSON: I think first things first. You just gotta have good instincts. I think that's just something that you're naturally born with and something you gradually get over the course of playing basketball for a long time. And the other thing I'd say is watching a lot of film. I know a lot of people don't watch themselves on the defensive end, but I take pride in that. So every game, going into the game, depending on who we're playing, I try to watch the best players' film and just try to see what they do, what their go-to moves are, what they like to do when the shot clock is running down. So I think watching a lot of film is a way that has helped me become a great defender.

Q. Have you always been a good defender, Kobe? Like going back to seventh grade you were a good defender?

KOBE JOHNSON: Absolutely. That was the first thing that I ever took like actual pride in, because I know that's what gets you on the floor in every level is your defense.

Q. How did you learn that lesson? What made you realize that, yeah, being a lead defender, that's my ticket?

KOBE JOHNSON: Yeah, I would say the most important one was probably just playing in the driveway with my brother. You know, he used to kick my butt a lot in the driveway. So I used to take that personally, and from there on out, I just -- I told myself I'll never let myself get killed again like that.

Q. So you're defending your brother every time we watch you shut somebody down?

KOBE JOHNSON: In my head, I am. In my head, yeah.

Q. Boogie, you mentioned playing at the next level. You obviously have a great opportunity to do that after this season. What do you think you need to show this year to improve your draft stock for next year?

BOOGIE ELLIS: You know, I feel like everybody knows I can score the ball. Just continue to develop as a point guard and being able to make the people around me better. And, you know, just showing that I can win. I feel like that's a big part of it, too. Everybody wants a winner. So just coming out here and winning.

Q. You each have a C on your chest, captains. For each of you -- is there any more captains or just you two?

BOOGIE ELLIS: Just us two.

Q. What does it mean to you?

BOOGIE ELLIS: It means a lot. It means coach trusts us with USC culture and he feels that we have helped establish that and I feel like we do a good job of leading by example.

Q. We do this with all the teams and we all do our homework going into the season and we see everything on paper, and we have the experience of seeing what we saw last year and we don't know some of the guys coming in. But if we're surprised by anything when the season starts or five or ten games in, what will we be surprised by, as a team?

KOBE JOHNSON: How good we are. I think a lot of people have a lot of hopes up for us this upcoming season

and have a lot of expectations coming from us. But, again, we're just going to go out there every game and just play our game. We know how good we are, we know how good we can be. So each and every day in practice we're pushing each other to be better, and I guess just me and Boogie just helping lead these younger guys and try and make a huge run this year.

Q. We wish we could see you guys play one-on-one, but I guess that's in practice and behind closed doors, and we'll look forward to seeing you all on the floor.

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