

# Pac-12 Conference Men's Basketball Media Day

Wednesday, October 11, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Utah Utes

Craig Smith

Branden Carlson

Rollie Worster



**Q. Walk that intro. You guys are used to it. This is what, probably No. 8 for you guys. It's ten. We're not the ones that get to walk out, though. We're going to finish with a flourish.**

Strong, man. How do you feel about your team?

CRAIG SMITH: I'm excited, but I feel like everybody in the PAC-12 is excited. I think it's going to be a very strong year for the conference of champions. But I am. I'm excited about our team.

We're going to look a lot different. We had a chance to go to Spain this summer, once every four years, right, we can take a foreign trip. And we went to Spain for about ten days and played four games. But the most important thing with that is we get ten practices.

And the guys have figured some things out. I like our camaraderie. We're just a lot bigger. We're a lot deeper. We're more athletic. And I ran into Don earlier today, and we can actually make some threes. So that's a nice bonus as well. So really excited about this team.

**Q. It's the most experienced group you've had since you've been at Utah too, right?**

CRAIG SMITH: No question. That was a big thing we're looking for. It was a little bit of a race to get older. The guys that are coming back to our program are veteran guys that over the course of last year and in some cases the course of our first two years garnered a lot of experience.

And then like a lot of people, we got into the portal a little bit. Couple of familiar faces with the conference of champions in Cole Bajema and Lawson Lovering, a JUCO transfer and then a high school guy as well. So we have a lot more depth, a lot more experience and experience that truly matters. And so I think it's going to help us.

**Q. How much better, because it seems like he's improved every year? And I remember being at your place early last year and Branden Carlson was trying to show everybody that he could make threes, and he'd kind of forgotten a little bit about why he was so good before he started making the threes.**

But it seemed like as the year went on, he found that balance that, yeah, I'm going to shoot some, but I can't forget about me being a force inside and all that. Where is he at in terms of what you want to see from him this year?

CRAIG SMITH: I'd say in our first year, so his junior year, his third year, people forget as a freshmen, he made three threes. As a sophomore, he made ten. So as a junior with our style of play, we tried to really expand his role.

So you're kind of learning some new things. Every two guard wants to be a point guard. Every four man wants to be a shooting guard. A lot of fives want to be a wing.

But like you said, Don, on the back half of that, he really -- he has elite touch, great feed. Amazing feed. And then last year, we put it all together. We put him in the block obviously a lot. Thought his passing and decision making really slowed down. And then he shot it well.

Tailed off a little bit late. I think some of that was some of our injuries we had, but he had a great summer. He tested the NBA waters, had a bunch of tryouts. I think he found out a lot about himself. He got exposed to some things, found out where he's really good with some things, had a great summer.

His leadership has been unbelievable. He used to be a quieter guy. And now you walk in that gym and he owns the gym, but he has a big-time voice, elite communication on and off the floor. And he knows exactly what is expected. And he understands this league inside out and backwards going into his fifth year and.

In today's day and age, how many guys go and play four years at the same school or five years at the same school? It's rare to find. There's a few in our league, and certainly

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he's one of them.

**Q. Coach, Lynne Roberts is doing a lot of things on her side of the building there at the Huntsman Center. How is that impacting your program now that people in Salt Lake City are remembering, we're kind of a basketball town too in addition to football?**

CRAIG SMITH: Well, we have an amazing department. Lynne is outstanding and what an unbelievable year and this close to getting to the Elite Eight last year and the National Champions, LSU Tigers.

But we have an amazing thing going on at University of Utah. Mark Harlan, our athletic director, Charmelle Green, our deputy AD. I mean, you just look across the boards. I believe we won ten championships as an athletic department last year.

And so, you know, when I took over this program leaving Utah State to come to the University of Utah, I really understood the history and the tradition of the men's basketball program, and I don't take that lightly.

I'm very proud and humbled and honored to be the men's basketball coach here. My first Final Four game ever was in 1998 in San Antonio when we lost to Kentucky. And that's where we aspire to be Hanno Möttölä, Michael Doleac and that whole crew was here about a month ago for the Hall of Fame banquet, and they spoke to our guys. Andre Miller, I can go right down the line, the legacy, the legends that have been through this program, the history, the success, it matters. And I don't take that lightly. And that's what we're aspiring to be.

So we made progress the first two years. We need to make more now, but the standard is to get to the NCAA Tournament and win in a big way in the NCAA Tournament and that's where we're aspiring to be.

**Q. Coach, you mentioned Lawson Lovering. I wanted to ask how has he benefiting in with the program and with Branden back? How do you see him fitting in on the floor this year?**

CRAIG SMITH: Yeah, so the questions about Lawson, I'm really excited about all of our new guys. As a coach, when you recruit these guys, you should be celebrating whenever you sign somebody, like you should be that excited about them and what they bring to the table, and certainly we're excited about all of them.

I would say all of them are a little better than we thought. And that's a good thing. And Lawson, you know, have followed him throughout his career. He played 8U at the

State of Utah and that was right when I got hired at Utah State. He was a young guy at that time, obviously a veteran guy, started every game last year in the PAC-12. So he understands the league.

Great feet, great hands, big-time mindset. And he's been outstanding. He had an excellent summer. Just keeps progressing. Still scratching the surface I think of where he can be, but he puts the time in, and he really wants to be coached. He wants to learn and wants to be coached.

I'm excited for his trajectory. And you asked specifically in terms of, you know, with Branden Carlson, right, a two-time all-league guy, I anticipate us being able to play those two guys together.

**Q. We just showed Gabe Madsen on that graphic, Craig. And it's not all on him, but it seemed like last year when he went down and got hurt, that really hurt your offense. It showed how important he was as a floor spacer, a guy you can't leave.**

And so, A, where is he at physically and how big is he going to be for you again this year?

CRAIG SMITH: Well, if there's anyone that loves scoring, it's this guy to my right and he can obviously score the ball at a high level. But you're right, Don. I saw the swamp thing with Urban Meyer and that whole Florida Gators deal. And Urban Meyer said when he first got there -- of course, he was at Utah.

And when you take over sometimes, your ones can compete with a lot of other ones. And we showed that last year. We beat the number four team in the country.

Then late in the year, and nobody's into excuses, we all know that. But Gabe is very important for our team, especially last year. We were Top-25 in a lot of defensive categories last year, but when Gabe went down with his ankle, that really, really hurt us.

And teams could really load up on some other guys. But here's where I was going with Urban Meyer, the ones can play with the ones. Our issue was our twos really struggled against other people's twos, if that makes sense. And so our depth just wasn't there or ready at that point in time.

And so Gabe is healthy, had a great summer, has had an excellent start to practice last 11 practices in now. He's gotten better. Right? And so I'm excited where he can go because he can really impact the game, has 27 or 28 against TCU, right? Top-25 team and really kept us in that game. But once we lost him, we just struggled to finish,

right, we just really struggled to score. We still scored guarded, but we have other guys now that can too. I think we are going to be a very good shooting team. Cole Bajema really brings another dimension on our program as well.

**Q. Was Madsen was rolling early in conference, in December I think, but teams could load on him because you didn't have a whole lot of others shooting and it seems like now some of the pressure is going to be taken off him because you have other guys that can do it?**

CRAIG SMITH: Yeah, you know. We may have made more threes in the first two weeks of practice than we did in January and February a year ago. And there's a lot of ways to look at that, but we do. We have more weapons, no question about it.

We have more guys that make plays off the bounce, which lead to easier threes. We have more guys that can get out and run in transition to get some of those simple ones as well. Cole is that way. Hunter Erickson was at Salt Lake Community College last year, transferred to there from BYU, can really shoot it.

Branden can obviously shoot it, Branden Carlson. And Ben Carlson, you know, was the one guy in our program that started every game a year ago, and late in the year, he started kind of figuring some things out. And he may have had the best summer out of anybody in our program.

And so really excited at the progression that he has made. So if it goes the way we think it will and it's all everybody's so happy right now on October 11th, but once you get into the grind, guys gotta be able to make some plays. And so I do think we have a lot more weapons and a lot more guys that can hurt you.

**Q. Craig, I hadn't thought of it and you kind of mentioned when you were talking about the tradition and you're talking about ultimately it comes down to the NCAA and what you're going to do. But it's interesting. I don't like to even talk about it being the final year. But you guys want to be better, more successful than you've been recently in the PAC. You know it's the final year. Are guys focused in on that even, you know, in the back of their mind knowing that this is it for the PAC-12 also?**

CRAIG SMITH: Yeah, I haven't heard them necessarily say that, but I would say that's the case for every team in our league. You know, it's the last stand, so to speak. And we have a lot of pride in our locker room.

I'm going to bring up Branden because obviously Don talked about him. He's our most two-time all-league guy, but that dude had a lot of options, right? And this guy loves the Runnin Utes. He's got a lot of pride in the University of Utah, and he wants so badly, as does our team, to get the NCAA Tournament.

We were right there last year. People forget like for a long time we were top three, top four in the conference standings. And according to Joe Lundardi in the tournament, 10 seed, 11 seed, 12 seed, that kind of thing.

So we got a group of guys that have a great attitude that craves improvement, high achievers, great character. And I like to think we got some talent. And so those guys are very connected and a tough-minded group. That's what they've shown. Now, we gotta go do it when the lights are on through those good times and through those tough times.

But I think it's safe for the whole league, and just walking around today too, you can kind of feel it, right? You can kind of feel some of the finality, and it's hard just some of the conversations today. What an amazing tradition this league has up-and-down and how historic it is, right, with all the years.

So our guys are excited. We want to finish this thing with a flourish and not only get to the NCAA Tournament, but win when we get there.

**Q. We just heard your thoughts on Branden Carlson. So as they come up, we will let you go. Rollie Worster is coming up as well. What do you like about him?**

CRAIG SMITH: There's not much not to love about that guy. He's a competitor. He cares about one thing, cares about one thing, and that's winning. There's nothing else that matters to that dude. And we stat out wins and losses in practice, right, and everything that we do and it's very rare that his team doesn't find a way to win, and there's always a way to win the game.

And so not everybody is into all these stats. I'm not a crazy stat guy. I think we had two or three games last year where he missed the triple double by one rebound.

**Q. I was at that game.**

CRAIG SMITH: Like Marco said, Rollie, you gotta earn that thing. I can't just give you a triple-double. You gotta earn it. But he does everything.

I like to ask guys, hey, BC, who do you like to play with. He's almost always going to say Rollie. I ask various guys

who do you like to play with. Rollie because he cares about one thing. He's single-mindedness mission so to speak. Guards the other team's best player most nights, does what he does on the offensive end, and he's a winner.

**Q. Thanks for the time, coach. Good luck this year.**

CRAIG SMITH: Go Utes.

**Q. I have an apology first off. I didn't look real close last night. But I ran into these two guys. This guy's gotten into such great shape, I didn't even recognize him. Literally I didn't look for very long, but I've done a lot of your games.**

So that, and then congratulations to you, Carlson. You set the north American record for most media days in one career.

BRANDEN CARLSON: I thought about that coming in.

**Q. I don't even know what to ask you you've been here so much.**

BRANDEN CARLSON: I can ask you the questions now if you want me to.

**Q. That's right. Go for it. I'm tired of asking questions. (Laughs). Well, it's good to see you guys. Coach just said it when he asks players on the team who do they like to play with, they say Rollie. So Branden, why is that?**

BRANDEN CARLSON: I mean Rollie is just a great leader. He's one of the most unselfish guys that we have on our team, and kind of like what coach already said, he is always willing to make the winning plays. Rollie knows his role on the team, and he's going to just go out there and compete each day in practice and in games that are just going to get us there to kind of push us over the top to get those wins.

**Q. We were talking with Craig about your roster and how you have a lot of experience, the most experience you've had since you've been here.**

Rollie, what has to happen for you guys, you mentioned going to the NCAA Tournament, what has to happen for you guys for that to happen?

ROLLIE WORSTER: Yeah. I just think like when we look at last season, one big thing is just putting it altogether. I think we had a great start, and we had some injuries like coach touched on earlier that set us back a little bit. But I

think just finishing the year strong, going into the tournament with some momentum was big for us.

**Q. Let's not bury the lead either because Branden tweeted the other day that the engine on his car failed happened to be the same day all the football players bought pickup trucks. You were looking for a truck. Did you find a truck?**

BRANDEN CARLSON: No, I didn't find a truck, but just to clarify, my engine really did fail a week and a half before that. So I just took advantage of it and had some people reach out, but nothing is settled yet.

**Q. Good luck. So you tested the waters. Tell us about that process, Branden and what you learned through that process?**

BRANDEN CARLSON: Yeah, so I tested the waters, and it was a great time. I had a lot of fun with it and learned a lot of things about myself. And I think just being able to see what a lot of these guys at the next level envision me as a big in the next league, and what they want to see from me going forward and coming back for one more year, and a lot of them were kind of encouraging that saying that this will be I think very beneficial for you to come back and have some specific things to focus on.

And I think the biggest thing for me is just kind of having a better mindset of being more aggressive and just kind of going at guys. They think my skill set is great and obviously have a lot of things to still improve on there, but just kind of having a mindset like when the ball is thrown up, a jump ball, and just the no more like kind of friendliness, I guess, and just kind of going.

**Q. What about defensively?**

BRANDEN CARLSON: Yeah, no. That's another big thing was just being able to see me guard in space a lot more. A lot of them are talking with me saying I'm playing more four offensively and defensively. In order to do that, I have to be able to guard in space, so that's something I've been really focusing on over the summer and feel like I've really developed some good habits with that.

**Q. The NBA now is switching everything and bigs have to switch onto guards, and so if you can't do that, it's a problem. So have you been doing like agility stuff, foot speed stuff to try and help with that or just doing it when you're scrimmaging?**

BRANDEN CARLSON: Yeah. We're doing a lot of agility with my strength coach, Coach O. But as well, I just think it's a lot of the reps in practices of being able to switch the

ball screens and closing out on shooters and just working it that way in the live areas of practice has really helped to develop it.

**Q. Coach mentioned maybe seeing you and Lawson Lovering on the floor together. I'd be curious to ask you what it's like to play with him, but I'll just start with Rollie, what's it like offensively to run with these two guys on the floor together?**

ROLLIE WORSTER: Yeah, it's been great. I think we've seen a lot of success in practice, actually, running that big, big lineup. And just to touch on BC's point, I think we've all noticed a big difference in how he can guard guards and switch onto quicker athletic guards and really be able to stay in front and contest jumpers. But I think a big thing is just how strong we are compared to last year, especially with those two guys on the floor at once. It's almost impossible to get an offensive rebound against them. So it's been really good.

**Q. What about your approach, Rollie? Obviously we talked about how much better the roster is this year. You're the guy in the half court at least runs the show. You have multiple shooters. You have a big that can step out. You have Lawson Lovering, big anchor down there. As practices have gone on, have you thought of, I need to do this differently, I can get downhill, kick out more, things like that where it's different this year than last year.**

ROLLIE WORSTER: Yeah, I think a huge thing is just the space on the floor, and surprisingly to me just because I never saw him do it, Lawson has actually been shooting well from mid range and even to three. And I think just the space has allowed me to be able to get downhill a lot easier and create for myself or others. But one thing I've noticed is I've definitely been able to get some more threes up with other shooters on the floor, and also having bigs down there, that really protect the rim well.

**Q. I don't know what's harder in this league, Don. You probably have an opinion on. Having to be a guard that guards in this league or last year this year will be the same the number of big time bigs in this league. It feels like every night he would be facing one of the best bigs in the country. That's how it felt to us did it feel that way to you?**

BRANDEN CARLSON: Definitely. Last year, and this year we have some big-time bigs with N'Faly Dante and Oumar Ballo and many more. It's always fun. I think it's a healthy competitiveness, and it just kind of shows how good the PAC-12 is and the talent that we have in there.

**Q. What a great opportunity for you. We were just talking about what you got feedback on the NBA. You're going to have a lot of opportunities to play against potential NBA bigs almost every night in the league. So that's going to work well for you.**

BRANDEN CARLSON: Yeah. No, definitely. That's something I'm looking forward to, and part of the reason why I capable back to Utah is knowing that, you know, it's going to be great competition all year long and that people will have eyes on those games, and it's something to definitely kind of have some motivation to work towards.

**Q. Well, it's one of the best home court advantages in the league when you get it rocking. So we'll look forward to seeing it rocking soon. And good luck this year, guys. We appreciate it.**

BRANDEN CARLSON: Thank you.

ROLLIE WORSTER: Thank you.

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