

University of Virginia Men's Basketball Media Conference

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Ron Sanchez

Press Conference



Q. What's it been like trying to integrate the transfers into the system, particularly at the defensive end?

RON SANCHEZ: The transfers come with a good level of experience. They've been around different coaches. They've done different things. But they don't have any shared experiences together with this group.

For them it really is getting to know one another. Some guys come from switching systems, and some guys have played a lot of zone, so we just have to find a way to be really patient with them and teach them our nuances.

It's not just about the system, it's about the details within the system. But I think guys are doing a great job of picking things up. There's a lot of energy. They understand that this program is built on defense, et cetera, so there's a level of buy-in on that side, and they're eager to learn it, and I think they're doing a good job of it.

Q. One of those transfers, Elijah Saunders, big uptick in production for him last year at San Diego State. What did you guys see while you were recruiting him and scouting him that you thought could fit your system?

RON SANCHEZ: I think he's a guy that can shoot the three ball. I think he's a guy that can guard multiple positions. He's got great size, very strong. I think his experience at San Diego State is something that he will really benefit from here due to the fact that he played on a Final Four team, played big minutes on a very good team. Those are things that we really liked about him as a player.

On top of that he's a phenomenal kid, just a great teammate. So we knew that about him, as well, and that also bodes well here.

Q. Ron, what were your and the staff's impressions of the scrimmages against VCU and Georgetown? What did you do well maybe and what did you not do so well?

RON SANCHEZ: We did a lot of good things. I'll share that. We had an opportunity to play a lot of young guys because Blake Buchanan and Isaac McKneely didn't get as many minutes due to a bit of an illness that I-Mac was dealing with, like a flu-like symptom or something like that, so he didn't play as much, so we got to see Ish Sharma get on the floor and play a lot more minutes than we thought he would, so that was good for him.

But I feel like we shared the ball well. We understood the concept of offense. Our spacing was really, really good in my opinion, and like always, your defense is always trending. We like where we are defensively. Some things we have to do better. But as far as this group and this being their second exposure to a different opponent, I do feel like they're grasping things really well.

Q. You mentioned Ishan Sharma from the scrimmages. What has been your initial impression of him here arriving as a freshman and what intrigued you as a recruit?

RON SANCHEZ: I like his ability to shoot. He has something he can hang his hat on, and that's going to be his weapon. Obviously the game is a little fast for him right now. He is a first-year guy. But as things slow down for him, I think you guys are really going to like his game.

Q. Can you tell me who's emerging in the post, specifically at the 5, in addition to Blake in general as far as players who can play that position?

RON SANCHEZ: Yeah, we're going to play different personnel at different spots. At times we're going to play small ball. We're going to play Elijah Saunders at the 5 at times just because he is physical enough to guard the position. He can switch positions, and he can also shoot the ball, so it'll give us a different dynamic of offense without having to change offensive systems just because the guy can really shoot the ball.

Q. You talked about Ishan, also got Jake Cofie. What do you think of those two freshmen? Do you think those guys are ready to play right away?

RON SANCHEZ: I think we're going to need everyone. Right now there's no discussion of redshirting anyone. You ask about the interior, Jacob Cofie is another guy that can play some of those spots, as well, but his ability to shoot the ball would also help us. He's been progressing well defensively, so we're excited about his ability to guard and rebound. He's got great hands and really good feel offensively.

Q. I'm curious, you have such a rebuilt roster with the transfers and new guys. What's the value of guys like McKneely who have been around, been in the system, been with you? What is their responsibility to help form this into a cohesive team?

RON SANCHEZ: Yeah, they have to play kind of a coach's role, especially in the locker room, understanding that some young players come in with the idea that we're just going to come in and shoot and fly around. No, in the system you can get your shots, but they have to be what we like to call predictable shots. Our offense and our defense are definitely married. They go hand-in-hand together, and if there's any friction between the two of them it won't bode well.

So we do have to do a good job explaining to those young guys or the new guys what it is that we've done here that's allowed us to have success, and the complement between the offense and the defense and how they work well together is really important for those guys to understand.

Q. You talked about editing the offense a little bit, playing with a little bit more space, maybe running some more. When you're going about making those changes, what are you pulling from to sort of build not a new system but an adaptive one?

RON SANCHEZ: It's not a new system, we're just trying to take advantage of opportunities when they present themselves, getting the 5 man to run hard to the rim in transition, having Isaac McKneely sprint hard to the three-point line, trying to see if we can get a mismatch just as the game flows. Doesn't have to be anything that's super creative or overly complex. It's just more of concepts, just let's get the ball up the floor in three or four seconds as opposed to five or six seconds. Just little things like that that I think will make a difference.

Q. How do you see the point guard position shaking out between Warley, Dai Dai, Christian Bliss? What do each of those guys bring and what are their strengths?

RON SANCHEZ: I think it's going to be by committee. All those guys are going to have to contribute. I do think that they all bring a different style to the position. Warley is

more of a long defender, taller. Dai Dai has more dynamic, kind of boogie to his game, so we have to allow him to be him. We want those guys to play to their strengths. We don't want to recreate their basketball personae. They have to be comfortable playing the positions within their own talents.

Q. In addition to the freshmen and transfers you also have two guys that redshirted last year in Anthony Robinson and Christian Bliss. Did that redshirt year help them get ready to make more of an immediate impact this year and how did that year help their overall development?

RON SANCHEZ: Yeah, throughout our history, our redshirts have done a really good job of developing over time. There's a reason why we redshirt them. Anthony is coming along and so is Christian. As far as immediate impact, I don't really know what that means. They're important to the roster, and we will use them accordingly.

Q. Obviously you have a lot more responsibilities than you did maybe a week, 10 days ago. Are there things that have come off your plate? Have you sat down as a staff and tried to divvy up some of the duties you had as an assistant coach that maybe you don't have time for as a head coach?

RON SANCHEZ: Yes and no. I think when you have a skill set, something you do well, you don't want to hand it off to someone else. Those things I'll definitely continue to do. As a staff we've always shared a lot of responsibilities, and now maybe some things will fall on somebody else's plate, but we do communicate well. Everybody plays a role, a big role in what we're trying to accomplish here.

I don't think my days are really changing that much except that you guys are taking my time right now and I should be watching film and doing something else. But away from that, most things are pretty static.

Q. Blake had some really good moments last year. He also had some typical first-year struggles. Where going into the off-season did you most want to see him improve, and have you seen that improvement from him?

RON SANCHEZ: Absolutely. Part of his development was just in the weight room. He needed to get stronger. You can't speed up Mother Nature, no matter what you do, so they have to spend time in the weight room kind of working on their physical development. His touch around the basket, his free-throw shooting, some of those things were also part of his skill development package.

I do see him making improvements in those areas.

Q. Last year rebounding at times was a struggle, and Tony used to talk about rebounding as a team. This year is Blake healthy, and the players that you expect to play in next to him and in place of him, will they be able to rebound enough so that you can get a fast break going?

RON SANCHEZ: I'm hopeful of that. We preach that every day in practice, from different drills to an emphasis. I think the players will do what you teach and you emphasize every day, and our desire to be a really good rebounding team is first and foremost. That's on you and your defensive possession. Whether that's going to help us in transition or not will depend on the opponent. You've got to make a decision whether you want to be a great offensive rebounding team or a great transition defensive team, so we will take advantage whenever the opportunities present themselves, but we don't want to lose a possession by playing so fast that we turn the ball over.

Things are going to have to work well in hand with what we're trying to do.

Q. Obviously Tony's retirement was a jarring experience for everyone involved in the program. What have you sensed is the response from players and their families as you have spoken to them over the last week to 10 days?

RON SANCHEZ: Good conversations. We've spent a lot of time communicating with parents, with players about the situation at hand. The overall message has been the university is still here; the program is still here; the need for your talent is still here and the stage is still here. Most of them have really embraced that.

Q. I'm interested in Isaac and Taine. We've seen them have really productive stretches. What did you task them with this off-season, improving, getting better at? What was the focus you wanted to see those guys work on?

RON SANCHEZ: I believe that when you're a good shooter, you become easily scoutable, and the better players that we've coached here in history, the Joe Harris and things like that, have also been really good at attacking the basket and getting to the rim so when they take away their one skill, they have something else to fall back to. We tasked Isaac and Taine to improve their shooting, their kind of plays off the dribble, attacking close-outs, et cetera, so they can be more productive on the floor.

Q. With Saunders, obviously you talked about he can play 5, he can play a couple different positions. Where do you see him defensively and how do you use him? Is there a player that you've had in the past that you can compare him to?

RON SANCHEZ: Maybe an Anthony Gill type of player. Elijah, I feel like he can guard a 2 through a 5. I wouldn't put him in that point guard match-up, but he's going to be tasked to defend some of the better players in our league. Because of his physical strength and because of his stance, he's got great balance. He moves his feet fairly well. We don't overdo it with him, I think he will be a really, really good defender for us.

Q. At Charlotte, what was the key in elevating that program to becoming a postseason player when you guys won a CBI, and what kind of lessons can you draw when you're in this seat at UVA?

RON SANCHEZ: Yeah, obviously this stage is so much bigger than that one. Expectations are a lot higher. The philosophy is the same. You have to eliminate losing to begin with. You have to prevent your team from doing the things that will cause you to lose games, and that's taking care of the basketball, not blocking out, rebounding well, getting back in transition, preventing easy baskets, contesting every shot. Offensively it's taking great shots every single possession.

This game is not as complex as people think. The objective here is to win more possessions than your opponent on both ends of the floor. That doesn't mean that you accomplish that, but if you understand that, that means that you play really hard. If you have to coach effort, then we have a problem. If you don't understand what good basketball means, then it's not going to work out.

So we have to understand what is a quality shot and what is a quality defensive stop. Just a team missing a shot is not a quality defensive stop. We want to contest, we want to block out, and then we want to give ourselves an opportunity to get on the other side of the floor because we ended the defensive possession well and vice versa.

Predictable shots on offense, meaning everybody knows that's a quality shot, will allow us to start our transition defense, and there are no surprises. Those two things work well in hand, but we do have a fairly young group, an inexperienced group that's starting to understand that, and that's the part that I'm most encouraged by.

Q. Could you tell me where you're seeing leadership within the teams, with the players, and has any of that increased over the course of the last week?

RON SANCHEZ: I do believe that there's genuine leaders in our locker room. As a group, I think they've bonded together more so, and some guys have been a lot more vocal over the last seven or eight days of practice, and that's been nice to see because as assistant coaches we have always encouraged leadership from within. We like to say that player-led teams are easier to coach, and I do think they're starting to understand that, as well.

Q. You've mentioned Joe, mentioned Anthony Gill. Have you heard from some of those former players that you've had here since the transition started, and do you mind sharing maybe what those conversations have been like?

RON SANCHEZ: I probably have heard from 90 percent of the guys that have come through here, most of their parents. Their parents have just been fantastic. Obviously they're excited for the opportunity, as I am so thankful to Carla and President Ryan for giving me a chance. But the former athletes have been definitely engaging, and I'm hoping that some of them will come to games.

Anthony, Malcolm and Ty Jerome were in D.C. this weekend, and a couple guys stayed behind just to go watch them play. I love the fact that we have this great relationship and connection with our alumni here, and they have been, they've been very kind with their text messaging and with just wishing the team good luck, et cetera.

Q. TJ Power was obviously a highly touted transfer who you guys also recruited in high school. What are you looking for him to do this season to contribute to this team?

RON SANCHEZ: I want TJ to be himself. TJ was a highly touted recruit out of high school. He obviously transferred here for a reason. He wasn't a heavy-minute guy, a high contributor at his previous institution, so TJ is still learning some things that are required at this level.

He's progressing really well. I'm excited that he's here. He's got great size. He can shoot the ball. He's scrappy. He's got a great voice within the group. I do think that he's going to contribute. How much and where, we'll determine to see basically on his ability to shoot the ball. He's not a post-up player at 6'8", 6'9". He's more of a shooter, so for him to contribute he'll have to shoot the ball well, share the ball. He's got great feel for the game. He passes the ball well. So he can make plays for himself but he can also share the ball and make others better.

Q. After the workouts and practices and scrimmages,

is this team where you thought they would be at this point?

RON SANCHEZ: Yes and no. As the team grows, we all come in with a plan, coaches. I want to be here, I want this player to do this. It's kind of like getting married. You don't know until you get into the household.

But what I will say is that they are eagerly pursuing the things that we as coaches are teaching, and that's the exciting part. This is a journey. It's a process for them to unite and get together. We can't be so result-oriented after every single practice and say we're not here. The question is are we getting there.

Sometimes you get there through failure, you get there through a bad practice, you get there through an exciting practice. For us it's managing the expectations of ourselves as coaches, but along the way understanding that we have to journey well, but I do like where we are as a team. I really do.

Q. I think you have an open spot technically on the staff. What are your plans and timeline for that?

RON SANCHEZ: I haven't really spent much time thinking about that. The focus the last seven days has been the team, sharing more responsibilities that were on my plate that maybe I can't handle right now and just getting the group to be in a great space.

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