

Atlantic Coast Conference Basketball Tipoff Media Day

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Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Duke Blue Devils

Coach Kara Lawson

Toby Fournier

Delaney Thomas

Women's Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the 2026 ACC Tipoff Q&A, and I am happy to welcome Duke to the stage. Head coach Kara Lawson entering her seventh season, Toby Fournier, as well as Delaney Thomas.

You're coming off your fourth consecutive 20-win season, back-to-back ACC titles, and consecutive Elite Eight appearances. Kara, you returned nine players, which include Toby and Delaney, as well as Emma Koabel and Emilee Skinner.

You added Aaliyah Crump in the 13th ranked freshman class. What are your initial impressions of this team, and anything that you can add in terms of the system on what we should expect, without giving away a scouting report?

KARA LAWSON: I mean, I think our expectations stay, you know, pretty much focused in on the same things. You know, we want to compete at a high level. We want to be one of the hardest-playing teams, and we want to challenge ourselves against the best teams and see how good we can be.

We're just at the beginning now, just two weeks into practice, so I don't know that I can say how good we can be, but they've come in ready to work. We have a lot of new pieces, so that's a little newer for us. We had T and Ash and the same starting back court for the last three years, so there was a consistency there.

There's a lot of newness for us in the back court, but luckily, we have these two in the front court and their experience and their winning mentality.

THE MODERATOR: You obviously know how to challenge this team. The four Final Four teams are on the schedule. Can you talk about how you put this together, and was it

purposeful to up the schedule this year to reach a higher level?

KARA LAWSON: We always want to play one of the top schedules in the country. That's been the case since I've had control of the schedule at Duke. Obviously the first couple of years there were some games that were already on the schedule.

It's what we want to do. We want to see where we are in a given time, and that exposes us and forces us to get better. We're not where we are at the end of last year without challenging ourselves in the nonconference, and we know that.

Whether you win games, whether you lose games, that part's irrelevant in some cases. It's more about figuring out where you need to grow and how you can maximize yourself.

THE MODERATOR: Toby, a ton of much-deserved recognition a year ago: All-ACC first team, All-ACC defensive team, AP third team All-American, honorable mention USA Today, honorable mention WBCA All-American status.

I say all that, because at the same time as you were getting the recognition, your rebounding and scoring averages improved while you pretty much had the same field goal percentage. That is a level of efficiency as well as making an impact. What was the focus this offseason, and did you add anything to your bag of tricks?

TOBY FOURNIER: I mean, I think this speaks volumes to the player development at Duke. You know, being with my position coach, being able to be coached obviously under Coach Kara as well has been amazing for my development as a player.

Then being able to play alongside the girls that I have been able to play alongside has been incredible as well. Putting me in the right positions. Like Coach Kara was saying, having Taina and Ash last year and my freshman year as well. It was great. Always putting me in the right positions to score. My sophomore year they also got better as well.



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I think we make each other better, and I'm really excited for this year as well with the freshmen. I know they're going to bring a next level to our team.

Again, different players, different individuals, but I think it's going to have the same results of putting ourselves in the best position to score.

So, yeah, you know, I think it's all about development, all about who you play beside. Throughout my time at Duke I have definitely gotten a lot better in terms of my stats, being able to take my time with the ball, and it speaks to the coaching staff, for sure.

THE MODERATOR: Delaney, I mentioned consecutive Elite Eight appearances. As a veteran leader on this team, what has your messaging been to the newcomers especially in order for Duke to take that next step?

DELANEY THOMAS: Yeah, I think for me personally the experience. Experience helps a lot in the program and in the tournament as well. So just kind of helping the younger ones come along with our team culture especially. Just our chemistry overall, building that on the court, off the court has been a big piece each day we come in.

Q. How do you help your players stay composed during close games and stretches, and can you describe a situation that, you know, just challenged you?

KARA LAWSON: I think, one, we practice situations, you know, practice late-game scenarios so that it's not foreign when we get there.

I don't know. You probably have to ask them. I don't know if I do anything. We just talk. Like, we talk normally. It's not all of a sudden we start acting differently because it's a close game or all of a sudden we start acting differently because it's a big game. We just act how we act.

Most of the time it's just conversations in the huddle. I mean, there are sometimes I'm yelling too if I'm frustrated with how we're not -- if we're not competing. I think that's what gets me to get going in the huddle with them, but for the most part, they compete at a really high level.

I don't know. What would you say in close games? I think we're the same.

TOBY FOURNIER: I think we're the same as well. I think in practice running through it a little bit the late-game situations with the clock ticking down, but we stay consistent in that I feel like.

KARA LAWSON: Yeah. I agree.

Q. Coach, unlike a lot of the other coaches, D1, big-time, how has the transfer portal affected your recruiting of high school players? I see you're strong on player development.

KARA LAWSON: I think any time you're in an environment and it's competitive, you have to assess every option as a viable option to improve your program. So we look at every option the way that is we can improve our program, whether that's out of high school or out of the portal.

I think we've been consistent in utilizing both, but we are unique in this space. We have 14 players on our team. 12 of the 14 have only ever played at Duke. That's rare. I'm going to guess that's a high for the ACC, but maybe it's not.

The other two, Riley Nelson played at a different school her freshman year and now has been at Duke for three years. Aaliyah Crump just came to Duke.

Yeah, we're different in that space. I didn't say better or worse. Just different.

Our players love their experience, and they enjoy playing with one another. Believe it or not, they enjoy playing for me. I think that's what keeps us together is there's a lot of connection that exists in our program from player to player and from coach to player.

There's a lot of love and trust and loyalty that we have and belief in one another. So that binds us, and I think that allows us to have a lot of success together.

Q. Coach, you have established a really tough, disciplined defense. How do you instill that standard into newcomers?

KARA LAWSON: You know, I say this with all sincerity. I think anything good that you see from our program or anything that you are applauding our program for comes from two main sources -- either our players or our assistant coaches. So I don't know that I'm doing anything in particular. I think it's finding players that will buy into being two-way players and not just focus on one end of the floor, and we have that.

Every player in our program understands the value of the defensive end.

It doesn't matter what I say if they don't feel that. Then our assistant coaches, you know, if you could watch -- I was



going to say I wish you could watch us practice, but I don't wish that. I wouldn't let you watch us. But if you did watch us practice, you'd see the high level of teaching that exists up and down our staff. Our assistant coaches are really good.

They're the ones in day-to-day that are working with them on the details and working with them in the drills. You know, I'm not saying I don't do anything. Don't take it that way. I play my part, and I think we just have high-level people up and down our program, our players and our staff, and everyone plays their part. That's what allows us to succeed.

Q. More for the players here, Coach mentioned that Ash and T departed this season. How have you all kind of felt their departure kind of affecting the leadership on the team, and how do you all feel that some of the upper classmen have stepped up to take that?

TOBY FOURNIER: I think it's really important to be a role model, especially for freshmen. We have an incredible group of freshmen, very talented. Knowing from my freshman experience and how chaotic it was coming in, coming to a different school, a new country for me, kind of knowing what that experience is like and being able to help them through the difficult times, because when you're coming into a Division I school anywhere, it's going to be, you know, a hard transition, and there's a lot of things that you need to learn.

I think, you know, like Coach Kara was saying, the defensive part, I didn't even know that that was something. Obviously I've always taken pride in my defense, but there are certain positions you have to be in, and there's so much details that you don't know about before you get to college.

So I feel like for me it's really important for me to help the younger players develop as well. Like I had T and Ash and Delaney helped me through my time at Duke in my freshman year, I think it's important for me now being an upper classman to step into that role.

DELANEY THOMAS: Yeah, I would agree. I think every year there's new changes you have to make. It's kind of a clean slate, so just remembering, like Toby said, how you were your freshman year and kind of going into that role of a senior, of a junior, of an upper classman, what you needed at that moment, and kind of being that for them.

Q. This is for the players. How would you describe the team's chemistry both on and off the court?

TOBY FOURNIER: I think our team chemistry, you know, it's incredible. We've just started practices. We had the summer together. But you know, the long practices now we've just started. But playing with everybody on our team, we have a lot of chemistry from last year because we have a lot of players coming back again.

And then also just having the freshmen as well. I think they've been a great element to our team. They fit in really well. I think that I say this every time I'm asked this question, but I think the connection that we have off the court and the way that we spend every second together. Even when we're not playing we're planning a dinner together or doing some activity all together, we choose to spend our time together.

So I think that that chemistry really helps translate on to the court as well.

DELANEY THOMAS: Yeah, I think it's kind of funny, because we -- the upperclassmen were given an opportunity to be off campus this year, and we all chose the same place, so we all live together. We just love each other, so I think there's just a closeness to us that's really special. I hope that everybody can see that too.

THE MODERATOR: Wrapping up, I'm going to ask each of you and we'll start with you, Delaney, give me one word to describe Duke women's basketball this season.

DELANEY THOMAS: Gritty.

TOBY FOURNIER: Tough.

KARA LAWSON: Competitive.

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