

Big Ten Basketball Media Days

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Men's Basketball Panel

Steve Pikiell

Rutgers

Mick Cronin

UCLA

Kevin Willard

Maryland



THE MODERATOR: Steve.

STEVE PIKIELL: We added four great coaches and great programs, so a great league became 18-deep. I felt good until you mentioned the 18% returning for my team. I thought practice has been good. We're undefeated right now, but I'm year nine, so I'm excited about that.

We have a lot of new transfers. We did the same thing. We needed to get some guys that could shoot the ball, but I was really focused on getting toughness. Guys that were tough. I think we brought in some toughness guys.

Obviously some talented freshmen that I'm very excited about. They can do a lot of things multi-position guys. All five of them will play. You know, we're just in the great league with great coaches, and you fight every day. You try to get better and someday healthy.

THE MODERATOR: I want to talk to the two of you about your history together. You spent time on Rick Pitino's staff at Louisville. Mick, you go first.

MICK CRONIN: You see our reactions.

THE MODERATOR: Describe the nature of your relationship there and how it's continued as you both embarked on being head coaches.

MICK CRONIN: We both had hair when we started at Louisville. Yeah, look, first of all, Coach Pitino is the best, so 30-something head coaches.

It is literally a training ground. He's not messing around. So we spent a lot of early mornings together. Kev -- I didn't drink coffee. He is, like, you are going to have to learn to drink coffee if you are going to work for Coach Pitino.

He said when we started playing at lunch make sure we foul each other really hard when Coach Pitino is watching so he won't start playing with us. We don't need him down here.

He just started telling me, foul the hell out of me, foul the hell out of me. Yeah, there's not enough time here for all

THE MODERATOR: Welcome, guys. I want to get an opening statement as I've done from each one of the coaches just on your team. Ken, why don't we start with you, and tell us what to expect from the Terps.

KEVIN WILLARD: I really like the additions we added. Obviously Derik Queen is a talented freshman. I think the biggest thing that we addressed in the portal was obviously we struggled to shoot the basketball last year. Everyone that came in through the portal and transfers were guys that could make shots.

Excited about this team. They're a great group. It's still trying to get to know them, trying to figure out first names every once in a while, but for the most part we brought guys in that could shoot, that could help complement Julian Reese and Derik Queen.

THE MODERATOR: Mick.

MICK CRONIN: Well, still trying to figure out who is who. Got eight new guys. This is going to be every year, by the way, right? I mean, this is just the reality of the new portal era.

We were able to -- this is crazy, Steve. You add a senior leader. You can get a guy. We need a senior leader, and you can go get one in Kobe Johnson in the portal.

Similar to Kev, we didn't shoot the ball well enough. We didn't score at the rate we needed to score last year, hence all that points per game stuff.

Then we needed to Adem Bona going to the NBA, which he did a great job for us and was An All-league player. So we addressed that with William Kyle and Tyler Bilodeau.



the stories.

KEVIN WILLARD: You know, I came from the Boston Celtics. I spent four years in the NBA and jumped over to college. I was very lucky to have Mick. Mick really took me under his wing about the recruiting aspect, what to do.

He actually gave me -- he gave me a number one day on one of my first days on the job. He said, hey, I need you to call this kid. I think we have a real good shot at him. I had no idea, so I called the high school coach and talked to the high school coach.

The high school coach is, like, yeah, hey, Kev, I really appreciate you calling, but you know this kid is probably going to be the first pick in the draft.

I had no idea. The guy goes, yeah, it's LeBron James. He is sitting over there laughing his you know what off, and he is just egging me on. He is, like, keep asking questions, keep asking him questions. I always say I recruited LeBron James really hard.

THE MODERATOR: Good tip. Yeah. You should have closed the deal.

KEVIN WILLARD: We've been friends ever since.

THE MODERATOR: That's a beautiful story. I want to know a little bit about -- UCLA basketball, you talk about synonymous with the -- it's the winningest in terms of national championships, winningest programs in the history of college basketball.

UCLA comes into the Big Ten. How does it -- what does it mean for UCLA basketball? How does it change? Does it change what you do, or do you just continue doing what you do and play different teams?

MICK CRONIN: Yeah, look, when you take the job at UCLA, you have to try to -- you have to go in knowing, look, my job is to try to compete for national championships. You have to embrace the expectations.

So I ran towards that, and I continue to do so. It's an honor of my lifetime to have been the coach at my alma mater at Cincinnati and now at the most storied program ever at UCLA.

That's just the reality that we're in at UCLA. So for me being in the Big Ten, I think I'm like the grim reaper, Dave. I was in the Big East. It broke up. Whatever league I'm in, it breaks up. Then the Pac-12 breaks up.

Look, to be -- for coaches it's just another challenge, right,

to get a chance to coach against -- well, not this guy, but -- we're like family, man. It's like the rest of the guys, you know, it's a great challenge. It's cool.

It's obviously tough for some of our -- the honest answer is for Don McClean who is here working with Fox and Kareem and a lot of the guys, it's hard for them to get their head around it, but times change and you have to roll -- we're from California, man. You got to ride the waves.

THE MODERATOR: I don't want to jinx it, but I think that your run of breaking up leagues is going to end here.

MICK CRONIN: I hope so.

THE MODERATOR: I feel like this one is on fairly solid footing.

MICK CRONIN: I hope so.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, the anticipation for this season at Rutgers is off the charts. I mean, it's the most anticipated season in Rutgers basketball history and so much of it --

MICK CRONIN: Well, Coach, I'm trying to defend you. Why don't you make it a little harder on us. I mean --

THE MODERATOR: So much of it -- in a positive way, so much of it surrounds Dylan and Ace. What have you said to them about handling that, about handling this spotlight, about handling the expectations, and everything that comes with it?

STEVE PIKIELL: Those two kids, they're from great families. They're basketball players. I want them to have fun, first and foremost. Rutgers Nation has been great. We sold out 63 straight games at home, so the fan base has been tremendous.

Our leadership with Jeremiah Williams and Zach Martini a couple of new players has been great for the younger guys. You know, I'm excited about that. I'm excited about the expectations. We always had high expectations, and now in a league with 18 teams, you know, people are saying, how good are you? There's 18 teams. They're great coaches. I don't know where we sit. If you came to our practice yesterday, you would say, oh, boy, and if you came a couple of days earlier, you might think, hey, they're going to be pretty good.

We're trying to figure out some of that stuff, but you know, New Jersey is a great state. Rutgers is a great university. We play in the greatest league in the country. Now we've added four historic programs.

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It's just going to get better. It's going to be a fun year.

THE MODERATOR: Kevin, you, as I hinted at earlier and you mentioned him in your opening statement, you have a great freshman too in Derik Queen. Kind of the same question. He gets paired with Julian. What's that going to look like in the front court? How do those two mesh? What have you said to Derek about all this?

KEVIN WILLARD: I think Derik comes from a great family too. He's got a great group of people around him. He's wise beyond his years, and I think one of the biggest things was Derik was really excited to play with Julian because Julian is in my opinion one of the best centers in college basketball. So he was excited now. He can play with him, but to learn from him.

So far had some practice Derik is like a sponge. He asks Julian questions. What do I do here? What's my counter move? What do I do here? They really work well together.

We have really high expectations for Derik, and I think Derik has really high expectations for himself. So embracing those expectations and saying, hey, this is who he is, this is what we're trying to do, but he has been great.

Julian has been a phenomenal leader. They're both from Baltimore. They both played a little bit together in AAU in high school. Julian has been great in taking him under his wing and saying, hey, this is how you do it, this is how you act. Derik has been great with it.

THE MODERATOR: Mick, your roster additions are impressive, and you brought back a lot from last year. A lot of people are picking you guys towards the very top of the league. When we visited -- I was on campus in the spring and you were telling me about kind of the challenge of, hey, how do we balance what we've got and go out and find the right players in the portal? What was that balancing act in terms of filling the holes you felt like you needed to fill, and you mentioned shooting and being better offensively, which clearly was an issue last year, but kind of where do you think you've made the most improvement?

MICK CRONIN: We got older. You know, I feel for Coach Pikiell here. He's going to try to win with some young guys, but they're a lottery pick, so you got a shot.

We were just not old enough last year. The reality of college basketball, we needed to get older and we needed a leader. Kobe Johnson is a huge addition for us. I'll be shocked if he is not an all-league player when it matters in the postseason, when the votes are tallied up.

He's just a winner. He defends. He's a good a defensive player as I have ever coached, and I coached a National Player of the Year two years ago defensively in Jaylen Clark.

We needed him right away, and we added a lot of scoring. Skyy Clark and multiple other guys in the portal. Tyler Bilodeau. Now you just have to put it together.

It's almost like the Yankees. You have to go out and get a whole bunch of free agents and figure it out. We're in the process of that trying to develop some winning habits, but I like the fact that we're more talented. I like the fact that we're older. Now we just have to become a team that knows how to win.

THE MODERATOR: Kevin, last year kind of similar situation. You weren't a great shooting team. How have you looked to --

KEVIN WILLARD: That's like the nicest way someone...

THE MODERATOR: How do you address that?

KEVIN WILLARD: We were dead last year. Man, this is great.

You know, we got older too. I think we had five freshmen on the roster last year. We played three freshmen over 25 minutes, which in this league I learned very quickly is a good way to lose a lot have close games. I think the biggest thing for us was I looked at I have a great center.

We have an incoming big guy coming in. We just have to put guys around him that are a little bit older, are going to throw throwing the ball in the post because they're going to get it back out.

Ja'Kobi Gillespie from Belmont was one of the guys early on that we saw in the portal that was -- we lost Jahmir Young. We lost someone that scored 1,200 points in two years for us.

I needed a guy that wanted to come in and take over that leadership role, take over the minutes role. Ja'Kobi is there.

Then I wanted someone -- we needed another guard. Last year we were just one guard short. We lost seven games by three points or less, and everything was on Jahmir. So Selton Miguel for us was a guy from South Florida that is a guy that can just go get a bucket. You don't have to run a play.

Last year everything was manufactured. When you have freshmen, as Steve is going to find out, sometimes you have to manufacture everything. A guy like Selton, Ja'Kobi, just give him the ball and get out of the way, and that's sometimes as a coach -- that's the best feeling you can have.

THE MODERATOR: Final thought from each one of you. I'll ask you all the same question. What excites you the most about this year ahead?

STEVE PIKIELL: This league always excites me. Going on the road, now adding UCLA, trips to USC, Oregon, Washington, I mean, there's great camaraderie in this league. These coaches can flat-out coach.

Mick, I was at Stonybrook, and I think they threw the ball up and about three minutes later I was telling the refs, keep this clock running because I have to get on the bus and get home. The game was over. Tough and physical and those kind of things.

To add the caliber of coaches and programs to an already great league and the venues now off campus, it's going to be exciting, and I'm excited for Rutgers and what we can be this year. That's the new part of having all the new players and all that.

You start off that year saying, we could be great, and we can be. So I'm excited about that challenge.

THE MODERATOR: Mick.

MICK CRONIN: Well, for the third time, I'm in a league with Rutgers. That's the most exciting thing. So the Big East, the American, and now the Big Ten. I get to go back to The Rack in the third league.

KEVIN WILLARD: I hate that place (laughing).

MICK CRONIN: I mean, look, for me I'm the basketball coach at UCLA, and I'm the only one person on earth that can say that. I turn left on Sunset Boulevard to go to work, Dave, and that's how I look at it. I do it with a lot better players this year.

It's a lot of pressure. I understand that. We have high expectations at UCLA to try to get the 12th banner up there, but there's nothing I would rather be doing. I'm looking forward to it. I'm excited about our team. Obviously we have all these new ingredients, but I turn left on Sunset, my friend.

THE MODERATOR: So you're excited about the drive to work. You're the one person who is excited about the

commute in L.A.

MICK CRONIN: Sandals and shorts and sun in January.

KEVIN WILLARD: You need to come jump on the Belt.

MICK CRONIN: You can have it, brother. You can have the Parkway, and you can have the Belt while I'm turning left and Bel Air is on my left.

KEVIN WILLARD: You are one lucky guy.

THE MODERATOR: The last word, Kevin. What excites you the most?

KEVIN WILLARD: Kind of what Steve said. I think this conference. I think a lot of people have talked about you have to go out west, they have to come out east. I think we're very lucky of the fact that we can play basketball from coast-to-coast.

We hit Chicago in between. Our players are really excited to go coast-to-coast. I think it's something that is really unique, and I think it's something that I think the presidents and everyone that did this and got everyone involved in these new teams out west. I think it's really exciting for everybody, and I think we're going to prove that we're the best -- by far the best college basketball conference in the country.

THE MODERATOR: That's a good way to finish. Thanks, guys.

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