

October 22, 2008



An Interview With:

TEXAS A&M COACH GARY BLAIR

PETER IRWIN: Coach Blair is now joining us at the head table. We'll let you make an opening statement, but if it goes more than three minutes I have to cut you off (laughter).

COACH BLAIR: Good to be back here. I think last time we were here we were fixin' to write a new story in the last five minutes of our ball game but it didn't work out for us against Tennessee.

But I think we learned a lot from it. I think we're a better basketball team this year, because of the expectations and learning and knowing how to win the big ball games.

I like my basketball team. I like Oklahoma City. Maybe some of you will get to try Mickey Mantle's tonight since you didn't have to use your per diem for lunch and you can get over to Mickey Mantle's.

But I'm excited to be here. I'm excited to see you sitting here covering women's basketball. You're here because you want to be here.

And I think that's the most important thing in women's basketball now is the people that are covering us are not assigned to us, you want to be here covering women's basketball. And that's a strength for our league and we lead the nation in attendance.

We lead the nation in exposure. And you are the reason. We appreciate you. I made it under three minutes, so what do I win?

PETER IRWIN: First question for Coach Blair.

Q. Can you talk a little bit about the strength of this league. You guys are picked fifth, made the Elite Eight, you have almost everybody back. Does that speak to how just tough this is going to be?

COACH BLAIR: My players are probably not going to answer that question later, but I'll answer the question. It's sort of like in football right now. You've got four teams in the top eight in the country, and you've got a few more knocking on the door.

I think it's going to be this way for a long time to come. I think the Big 12 top to bottom is the best conference in the country. And I'm glad to be a part of it. But we're not just a part of it. I think we're a legit top 10 to top 15 team and now it's up to us to live up to it just like it is for the other folks in this league.

Being picked fifth in the conference, that doesn't bother us. It amazes me, whatever word you want to say. I think we're going to be pretty good. And I like my basketball team. We've had six good workouts so far. We're taking today off.

This is the most depth that I've ever had in a basketball team, any time, anywhere, and that's all the way back to the Louisiana Tech days.

Q. What happened to coach-speak? The size of your girls' heads have got to be about to explode. You're being very open and nice.

COACH BLAIR: Coach-speak? Well, there's no more Lou Holtz in me, I guess. I think it's time for us to become a power. You've got to think like a power.

You've got to expect it every day. We used to really come to this media day and all the way from Arkansas to here and we would want to be champions.

I think we know the formula to be champions now. And it's not taking away from the other teams at all. I'm talking about Texas A&M. We expect to be playing in a championship game. We expect to be at the front. We expect to be in the top 25 polls and in the magazines.

We expect to get some of the top recruits in the country now. That's what this coaching staff was brought in for. And I think we're delivering.

And I like that role. So is poor mouthing over? No, it will still be right there before ball

games, and I'll come up with some new lines and everything like that.

But at the same time let's give credit to the league. The league is pretty doggone special. Eight teams made it. Eleven out of 12 were in the NCAA or the WNIT last year. What other sport do we have in the Big 12 right now that's doing what we're doing? Women's basketball-- that's where it's at.

Q. You referred to A'Quonesia as your Energizer Bunny the last four years. Does one person take on that role or is it spread out more among the team?

COACH BLAIR: As most of you know, Sydney Colson blew out her ACL in June, surgery in July. She'll be released to start practicing November 9th. And when we get her back, it will be a great day in my life because Aqua's called every play for me for four years. And Sydney is going to be our point guard when we get her back.

Right now, in practice, we cannot run an offense. Starks is having to play the point right now until we get -- we've got our other freshman out with a sprained ankle since the first practice. We're hurting right now.

But it's making our defense look awfully good. But Colson will be there. But, remember, when you're coming off an ACL, even if she plays well, she will only be at 85 percent this year. And that's when we get her back. But I think she's going to be very special.

I think she's similar to Erin Grant when she played at Texas Tech. Same frame, same type of attitude. She can create points. She might be a little more of a scorer than Erin. Erin was more of a distributor. They're more similar to how they play the game.

Q. Can you talk about Danielle? I can't imagine she did much in the off season to become worse, but what role does she play now on this team?

COACH BLAIR: She led our team in steals. She led it in field goal percentage. She led it in free throw percentage. She led it in offensive rebounds. She led our team in rebounds, average 14.7 a game and she's not first team All-Big 12. I don't think she's gotten worse. I think she's gotten better over the summer. And it's good to bring her back. This is her first media day and it's very special to bring her back to Oklahoma City.

I think you have her and Earnesia Williams both coming back, and I think that's a tribute to the

high school ball here in Oklahoma, what those two kids have meant during their careers. Now they get a chance to play against each other twice a year.

But Danielle Gant is the hardest-working 5-10 player I've ever coached in my life. Any time, anywhere, that kid comes to play and I think that next level -- they're drooling for her. They really want her. But she's been out most of the summer due to a scope on her knee at the first of August.

So she's practicing but we're very limited with her right now. But we want to save her for the real dance.

Q. With eight girls returning and you got a big freshman class coming in, it's early but how much do you expect to get out of those younger players through this season?

COACH BLAIR: This is one of our best recruiting classes that we've brought in. I think you've got a lot of balance in it. I think Tanisha Smith is going to be very good for us. She can play 1 through 4. Tanisha Smith is going to be a very good player. She's picked to be the new-comer of the year. I hope she'll have the same impact that Seals had for Texas Tech last year. I think she's very, very versatile. She's coming in, doing a good job for us.

I really like a girl that you hadn't heard a whole lot about, Skylar Collins. She's out of Cedar Hill, 5-10, very physical. Great defensive player for us. Energizer. And Adaora Elonu, the sister of Junior Elonu who will start for our men's team at the post position. Adaora is one of those 6-1- 4 players, and she's looking very well it will be hard to keep her out of the starting lineup.

Between those three, and you cannot forget about Tyra White, because she only got to play four minutes of her freshman year. Former McDonald's All-American, and she's just got the TK jump shot, Starks' jump shot except she's about four inches taller. And she can get it off whenever she wants to.

So we're excited about those kids, but at the same time the experience that we just graduated Morenike and A'Quonesia, that's hard to replace kids that have done it. These kids coming in have the potential to do it. But they haven't done it yet.

Q. One, seems like you've got an awful lot of the really good 5-9, 6-foot athletes there,

but outside of Micheaux you really don't have the post player. I was wondering how that was coming together for you, the inside game. Second of all, Kurt Budke wanted us to ask you about winning the long drive competition in Dallas this summer.

COACH BLAIR: Well, first, at the post presence, Damitria Buchanan is doing a good job of competing for that starting position at the 5 this year. She played well against Tennessee down the stretch, and I think you will see those two, like a two-headed center.

And then we're going to move the Assarian kid, freshman from Florida, scores well in there. She sort of gets it done like Savant used to at Missouri or Allison at Baylor, those type of players. But I think she's going to be good for us. Yes, we need more scoring inside. If we cannot get it this year, hopefully we can get it this next year on the recruiting trail.

But that's all to be determined and we'll just have to see how all that plays out. But I like my kids. You can win -- I think the Bulls, if I'm not mistaken, won about six world championships. Can anybody think of any post player that scored more than eight points a game for them? Didn't happen. So there's a lot of ways to win in basketball, in football or any sports. I think Tampa Bay is playing tonight, aren't they?

I love this quote somebody said: The whole team for Tampa Bay does not make as much as Jeter and Rodriguez for the Yankees. That's something.

Now, about Budke. To tell you the truth, when the long drive contest -- it was for the Kay Yow Foundation. And my old mentor, Leon Barmore, beat me by a yard.

Now, we do not drive it very far, but we got to hit from the senior's tees because we're over 60. But it's also glad to have Coach Barmore being brought back into the league because he mentored both Budke and I and Mulkey. And Mickey Demoss at Texas. So he's meant a lot. But it's good to have somebody back in the league older than me.

So I'm excited. Budke, if I can't beat him on the golf course, I'm going to retire from coaching. And that's a fact.

PETER IRWIN: Thank you, Coach.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports