

October 22, 2008



An Interview With:

OKLAHOMA COACH SHERRI COALE

PETER IRWIN: Coach Coale has joined us from Oklahoma. We welcome you, and if you'd like to make an opening comment or two before the questions.

COACH COALE: I'm excited to be here. Thrilled to death that the Big 12 Tournament will be in Oklahoma City again. We had such a phenomenal experience here the year before last, and I guess it's easy for me to say since we got to cut the net down.

But I think every team that participated in it had a phenomenal experience because of the way that the people of the city embraced the women's basketball tournament. So I love the fact that the two venues are side by side and fans can participate in both men's and women's tournaments and particularly excited about our men's opportunity this upcoming season, their ranking and what they might be able to do. So it's nice to have them right here in the same city for the conference tournament. And I'll open it up for questions.

PETER IRWIN: Questions.

Q. Talked to Gail earlier about when you have those special player or players that are more to you than just a player; that it's tough sometimes their senior year to keep that balance of the bittersweet and pursuing your goal. Can you kind of talk about that? She had that with Alena Beard, having that with Courtney and Ashley.

COACH COALE: Well, if you do the thing right and if you recruit in the right way and develop kids and they commit to the program and are immersed in your mission not just as a program but as a university, that situation presents itself with

regularity. And I don't necessarily differentiate between one year and another.

I just think when kids have been in your program, particularly for four years, certainly not to discount a junior college experience, because Rosalind Ross came in and played two years for us, as did Jamie Talbert, and it was just so tough to see them go, as it was Stacey Dales or Dionna Jackson, who had been here for four years.

But I think when you go through the development process with kids and watch them grow and become, it's always a little bit difficult to let them go.

Q. Pat Summitt and Geno have been sort of celebrity coaches for a long time, but now you and Kim and Goestenkors have sort of reached that status, too. Is that good for women's basketball?

COACH COALE: I suppose if your question is having a multiple number of pseudo superstars, I just can't even say that with a straight face. I'm from, Hilton, Okla., for heavens sakes. I think having a lot of recognizable faces in the sport of women's basketball is great for the growth of our game.

I think that there was a time, particularly when I was playing college basketball in which Pat Summitt and Jody Conradt were the only two faces you would recognize as Division I women's basketball coaches. So I think there are lots of faces that flash across ESPN these days and readily unite the mind with the sport of women's basketball.

I think that's nothing but positive for our game.

Q. I know high expectations are nothing new, but without cussing, what was your reaction to SLAM Magazine picking you No. 1?

COACH COALE: John, you would be the one that would need to stop cussing, not me. (Laughter).

Actually Coach Capel, Jeff, sent me a text

message and said, "Where are you?" And I said "DFW Airport." And he said "Go to a newsstand."

I said, "Why? Terrified, why? What's happened now?" And he said "Go buy *SLAM*." I said no because I knew what he was going to say when he said that. I went and looked at it. I didn't buy it, put it back on the shelf. One of those things where you go it's neat that there are so many teams now that can be considered.

I still think there's a handful, but there was a time when who's it going to be, Tennessee or Connecticut, which one will be No. 1. Now if you look, depending on however many polls are out there, there's a lot of different No. 1s and a lot of different 1 through 10s even. So it kind of gets spread around a little bit. And I think it's an honor.

We count it as a tremendous compliment, we're flattered by it, but at the end of the day it doesn't really mean anything at all except we got in *SLAM* Magazine, now we've got to go play and prove it.

Q. Do you have any idea what your starting five looks like yet or does it matter yet?

COACH COALE: No, it doesn't really matter to me. You've covered me long enough to know that's the answer I'm going to give you. We've got five days of practice and they've been really, really good and I said a number of times the air in the gym has been really good. It's been clean and clear and we've had people working and learning.

I think our freshmen have moved along really rapidly. And part of that is because they were prepared and part of that is because our upperclassmen have helped them be successful in the first five days.

So I've just been really pleased with it and I think we have -- depth could be -- and I want to emphasize "could be," because it depends on the continual development -- but depth could be a strong suit for us. I think we could go a couple deep in most positions and not lose much.

It's hard when you look at it to say where is the line. These are the guys who really get it and these guys have got a ways to go. It's hard to put a line in there, and I think this early that's probably a pretty good sign.

Q. Maybe as impressive as being picked No. 1 in the nation is being picked No. 1 in this conference. Several coaches mentioned earlier today they've never heard of a

preseason poll where five of the league teams received first place votes.

COACH COALE: Yeah, it's crazy. You look at what this league has done last year, eight teams winning in the first round of the NCAA Tournament. I think 11 of 12 went to postseason play.

What we do, obviously, in terms of attendance and what we've done for nine consecutive seasons leading the country in attendance, this league is big-time women's basketball. And what I think makes us so unique is the fact that every year it's someone different.

And even though it's not really important who is picked to win it at the beginning, as the season goes through there might be three or four or five different teams who are on the top spot for a little bit. And it comes down to that last week.

I can't remember the last time, I guess perhaps when we ran the table Courtney and Ashley's freshman year, the last time that you kind of knew going into the last week of the season who was going to win the league championship. The rest of the time it goes down to the very last game that determines who the winner is.

So I think it does a couple of things for us in terms of postseason play. I think you're prepared -- if you're not worn out and beaten up -- you're prepared for what happens in the NCAA tournament. But you're not only prepared in that you've been challenged. You've been challenged in a number of different ways because teams in this league don't all play the same.

We have some transition teams. We have some zone teams. We have some physical man-to-man teams. You see a lot of different types of basketball and it only bodes well for your opportunities in post-season.

Q. Now that you've had time to reflect back on the end of last year, and with the losses that you had toward the end of regular season in postseason play, now that you've had time to reflect on that, what have you been able to assess and learn from that and take into this season?

COACH COALE: You know, I didn't learn anything new after a summer of reflection that I didn't know when I was sitting there watching us lose to Missouri and Kansas City last year.

Our whole is not greater than the sum of our parts, period. We have to be better together.

We talk about that with teams all the time. You talk about that with your team. It's not enough just to be talented, it's not enough just to be just good players; you got to figure out a way to be great together. It's that all just sounds like gibberish until you live through it.

And the reality of our crumble in February last year was just that, that we weren't real good together. And even though we had some fantastic parts, we just weren't good enough together. And that's what team sports are all about.

So we learned that lesson on our feet. We lived it. And it was obvious and our players made an immediate and apparent commitment to try to get it right.

And I think our play in the NCAA Tournament was a reflection of that. We just didn't have enough game experience in terms of really believing in one another and being solidified together to be able to survive a really hot Notre Dame team, but we played a lot better in the tournament than we did in the final weeks and months of the season.

Q. Talk a little bit about Whitney Hand and what she's going to bring to this program.

COACH COALE: Well, Whitney obviously has everyone's attention, preseason pick for rookie of the year in our league. Just an uncanny shooter. Maybe the most prepared player we've ever had in our program at the University of Oklahoma in terms of coming in ready to make an impact.

Some kids might come in, might have the intellect for it, but their bodies aren't physically prepared for the rigors of physical play in this league and at this level, or some come in and their bodies may be ready but their basketball IQ is not. Sometimes they're very athletic but their skill is not polished.

So there's often some area of the game that keeps them from being really prepared to make an immediate impact, and that's not the case with Whitney. She's really sharp. She understands the game. She learns quickly. She's a big, strong girl. She's capable of holding her own. She's in fantastic physical condition. And her skill set is something that's truly special.

So I think the league is in for a treat in watching Whitney Hand compete for four years. Bill Fennelly and Gail and those guys might disagree, they might not think it's a treat. But special kid.

But I think our league has had a history of those. When you think about kids came through K-State and Iowa State and Sophia Young at Baylor, go down the list of some remarkably talented kids that we all got an opportunity to witness playing special careers here in this conference. And I think Whitney is in that vein.

Q. There seems to be some surprise from Gail Goesten Kors and other coaches maybe that Texas was picked second after finishing seventh. Is there something about that team that you've noticed that would lead you to believe that?

COACH COALE: They kept getting better. The deeper the season went, the better they got. That was the number one indicator. Plus, they're pretty talented if you look down the roster. They have size. They have speed. They have skilled positions. They have depth, their young guys are good.

It was Gail's first season. The longer they played for her, the more they played like her, the way she wanted them to play. And I think that will only increase after having been with them in an offseason and starting this year.

So I think everybody understands the talent level and the room for improvement that those guys have together.

PETER IRWIN: Thank you, Coach.

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