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An Interview With:

TEXAS COACH RICK BARNES

PETER IRWIN: We're now joined by Coach Rick Barnes from the University of Texas. Welcome, and your opening comments.

COACH BARNES: I'm ready for questions.

PETER IRWIN: Questions.

Q. Rick, just take a broad look at the league this year, something of a transitional year from probably the league's best year to in between another year when a lot of big-time recruits are coming in. What do you see this upcoming season?

COACH BARNES: Well, I think every year, when you go into it, right now we all probably really don't know what to expect I think as we start putting our teams together.

But as I look at the league, I just know -- obviously as I look at the South division, I look at Oklahoma and certainly a team that I think is going to -- got better throughout the year, had a good year last year.

And you go down from there, Oklahoma State, I think they're going to be a better team with what they have returning. A&M has been very, very good. And so you go through the whole league, and then I think Kansas. Kansas won't be short of players and talent.

But I think our league will continue to get better as we play games this year. I do think that. I think as we -- conference play is always tough. Conference play is tough with every league, but I do think you'll see teams within our league improve as the season goes along.

Q. Could you go through kind of the first week of practice, what you've noticed and what stands out to you?

COACH BARNES: Well, there's a lot, really. I think there's been some really good things. In fact, this team that we have is a team that, one, I think they like each other, respect each other. The chemistry's been really good.

The work ethic has been really, really good. Obviously you take two players in Connor Atchley and A.J. Abrams, who have been around seems like forever now, with the fact that we've lost guys early to the draft, these guys have been with us a long time now. And those guys are playing like you would expect fourth- and fifth-year players to play.

And there's not one guy on our team that hasn't improved from last year. I think that the last two days has been very physical. We've really tried to stress our defense and our rebounding and worked really hard the last couple of days oppose defense. So it has been very, very physical.

But really been happy with two guys I think that have really jumped out and probably -- I'm not sure I'd say surprised, one of them was probably surprise is Varez Ward, the freshman that came in. He's well beyond -- physically might be the most impressive player as a freshman physically that we've had in a long time, just the fact of his stamina and he's got great instincts. You wouldn't know he was a freshman with the way he's able to fight through the fatigue of practice and the physicality of it.

And Dogus Balbay, our point guard from Turkey, the last couple days has really done a nice job. And for the first time I've put him with I guess you would say the first group, and he was pretty impressive.

So I feel, again, after just a couple of days, I think as a staff we feel that our guard play is going to be solid. Our perimeter play will be solid, and then I do think our inside game will continue to get better and better each day, because we've got guys that are working at it.

But overall, after, what, five or six practices, we're pretty pleased with where we are.

Q. For a long time people said the Big

12 needed someone to win a national championship. Kansas did it last year. What was the impact of that how can that help not just Kansas but the league?

COACH BARNES: We've had so much success as a league basketball-wise, that's just a question that had to be answered and Kansas did answer it. So we'll give everybody a chance to come up with another question to ask now. What do we need to do now?

And I think that any time that -- the Big 12, I mean, you think about it. We've got the defending national champion in our league now. We've got a lot of football teams ranked up there in the top 10. The Big 12 can arguably talk about being the best conference of all.

In a short time it's certainly had great success when you talk in a lot of areas whether it's football, basketball, swimming, track and field. If people wanted to start comparing numbers over the last 10, 12 years, we would be right there with all of them. And the fact that Kansas finally did win the national championship in basketball, I don't know if it's going to change the way people view our league. I don't know if that will happen.

Our league has gotten better. Over the last -- the time I've been in it, I've watched every facet of our league get better from the quality of players we bring in, the officiating, you go all the way down. Our league, we can hold our own with anybody.

Q. Your thoughts on the new 3-point line, any factor in the game at all or are shooters going to keep taking the open shot regardless of where they are?

COACH BARNES: I really thought as we began planning for this year that the line would be a factor, moving it back a little bit. And my original thoughts were that we would probably play a little more zone. But after being in practice and really being there with it, I'm not sure if it's going to be that big a factor. I'm just not sure.

I know it hasn't affected our guys that really use it in terms of A.J. Abrams, Connor Archley, Damion James, any of them. I don't know. I just don't really know the answer. I thought it would. But, again, after being in practice with it, I'm not sure it will be that big a difference.

Q. What do you think will happen with the balance of power in the conference with so many players leaving early in the North?

COACH BARNES: I don't know. We've lost guys in the past, and really that's what makes the college game what it is. When guys leave, it opens the stage, the platform for someone else. And our league, there will be some stars coming in to it this year, guys we might not know about. It's going to be exciting. It is every year.

But, again, I think that we all -- again, speaking from when we've lost players, you just take what you have and you really recreate a different team with what you have. And I think Bill's lost some guys obviously but he's got some good ones there, some good ones coming in. It's a matter of taking this group you have and trying to make it the best it can be.

But this year there will be some guys that maybe we think and we know about but because they now have the spotlight on them, they'll step up and become the kind of people that players, stars, if you want to use that word -- that they'll get some recognition that maybe they haven't gotten in the past.

Q. If you look back to the new three-point line, do you think it can actually help percentages by deterring the posers, that only having the good shooters take threes now?

COACH BARNES: So far up to this point in practice, I mean, Matt Hill is a guy that we're going to let shoot threes and making some threes in practice, but he's the only guy on my team that I've had to say to him you're not going to shoot the ball with your heels on that line. There's an area there that's a low percentage area.

And he hasn't played in a while, but he's the only guy that's had a tough time -- if it is a tough time, I guess exactly knowing where he is there at that point in time.

But, again, I don't know. We just haven't approached it any different. We're telling guys to shoot it. And we've always had an NBA line down on our court, our practice court. We practiced from there. We've always done that using the NBA line as just as a practice tool.

But really it hasn't -- other than Matt stepping on the line a couple times, either with his toes or his heels, he's the only guy that I've had to say one word to about the three-point line up to this point.

Q. How has your team adjusted to

having a new point guard and also not having a player like D.J. on the court?

COACH BARNES: Well, I think our program is at the point where, because we have lost guys, I think their attitude is, "okay, it's just the way it is and we're going to take what we have." And we've used A.J. at the point a lot, and when we recruited A.J. he was a point guard coming in. And he's done a really nice job. A.J. can really pass the ball. He's got great vision.

I've said before he's one of the smartest players, if not the smartest player, we've had at Texas in terms of his basketball IQ and the things that he sees out there.

Justin Mason has worked at the point, will bring a different style there with the way he would play it. Dogus is as fast as any player we've had at Texas since T.J. Ford. When he comes in a game it is a high -- it's really fast.

And so all three guys bring a little different I guess style, pace to that position. But in terms of how our team has reacted, we move on. We don't talk about it. We haven't talked about it when we lost any of these other players. What I was trying to allude to earlier, when you lose guys, I don't think you dwell on it. You just take what you have and you go with it.

But our team, we don't talk about replacing guys. We just take what we have and we're going to make it work here. I don't have any problems at all or any concerns at all with how we will be at the point position.

Q. Going back to that NBA line on your practice court, what's the thinking there? Is that a little like swinging the leaded bat before you go to the plate?

COACH BARNES: Probably, same thing. We've used it there for years and years. And maybe as a motivational tool telling those guys they want to get to the next level they better be able to make this shot too. I guess it's the overload theory to get them to use their legs more. But they will shoot it, and some guys can -- they don't need any lines. They think any time they're out there they're open especially way out there.

But I think it helps us, I do. And I think our players like having it there. Sometimes we obviously use it for spacing purposes, with our offense. But, again, it's been there for every year I've been at Texas we put it down and we've used it.

PETER IRWIN: Thank you, Coach.