

March 14, 2008



An interview with:

**COACH BLAIR
A'QUONESIA FRANKLIN
MORENIKE ATUNRASE**

THE MODERATOR: We are joined by Texas A&M University Coach Blair.

Opening statements?

COACH BLAIR: I'm speechless! (Chuckles.) I'm speechless, and I'm hungry and my brother wants to go to the boats!

The media that's here, I've been following all of y'all for a long time, like y'all have been following us, and I appreciate all of you here, because you're doing a great job of covering Big 12 women's basketball in the national scene. And I really believe we're growing in stature on the national scene with these Monday night games, but where is the Big 12? Hasn't been one, has there?

You had OU and Georgia on a Sunday. So we can't keep promoting the same six or seven schools, okay? But I appreciate what you're doing. What Beth and Debbie are doing on their radio show is excellent.

If y'all haven't listened to it, our fans of all 12 of our schools need to listen to that show, they can pull it up on the computer. It's like an encyclopedia of what's happening in women's basketball, and we do not have enough national news to keep everybody informed. And hopefully the committees that choose which 64 teams go into the tournament start listening to Beth and Debbie and start reading some of y'all's stuff out there.

I would like to thank the media for giving us the coverage. That is the shortest opening statement I've had since last night.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for our student athletes?

Q. A'Quonesia, talk about the battles you've had with Oklahoma State the last two years and how fierce it's going to be tomorrow.

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A'QUONESIA FRANKLIN: It's going to be very fierce. Last year I believe we won by a grand total of four points between the two -- both games combined, and this year they came to our home, and Riley hit a great 3-point shot with four or five seconds left on the clock.

And we went down to Stillwater, it was a great battle, great competition, and we tried to dissect the zone and we came up with a win.

Q. A'Quo, Morenike, Coach Budke said you guys were a legitimate Final Four team and fighting for No. 2 if you win this game. Talk about being in the conference championship and really having something to play for besides the conference championship.

COACH BLAIR: This is the first time Texas A&M has been in the conference championship game, and it means a lot to us. And playing Oklahoma State, which is a great team, is going to be a good game tomorrow. We're just glad to be in the championship game.

A'QUONESIA FRANKLIN: I would like to thank Coach Budke for the nice compliment. We have to take one thing at a time. This is a great place to be, and we haven't been here in my four years, and this is a great building experience for us, gives us great momentum going into the further selection committee that picks the 64 teams and however they seed us. We look for a No. 2 seed.

Q. Y'all have been around the last few years when Baylor got all the headlines, OU got all the attention. How personally satisfying is it for you that now it's Texas A&M's turn to enjoy this and have a chance to be on top of this thing?

MORENIKE ATUNRASE: To me it's satisfying, but that shows how strong the Big 12 is.

They can be in their first game, Oklahoma will be here in their first game, it shows how strong the Big 12 is and what kind of talent the Big 12 has.

Q. (No microphone.)

Coach Blair – 03.14.08

MORENIKE ATUNRASE: It makes it -- not easier, but it makes it hard, because you have to play each other twice, and it makes it difficult for us not to beat each other out.

Q. Mo, you had the injury problems earlier in the year. How tough was that for you and when did you finally feel like you could go 100% and go all out?

MORENIKE ATUNRASE: I don't think I can pinpoint one game that I felt exactly 100%, because I don't think any athlete can say they were 100%.

My injuries have been hard for me because I've said this before, I've never been injured, I've never been faced with any bone, muscle, any kind of problems, and I've had the opportunity to be blessed and be injury-free, but it's given me a great way to build my game and that's just been great to help my team out any way that I could.

Q. You guys had such a rough start to the Big 12 season. Was there any time you guys were worried about pulling it together? Did you feel like the chemistry would come together as the season went on?

MORENIKE ATUNRASE: I believe after the Nebraska game, after we lost on the road, the Coach came into the locker room and the team got together and talked about it and we were like, y'all, we've got to turn this around. We've got to do what we did last year when we won the Big 12, and after that we went into the gym and worked on the fundamentals, defense, offense, guard moves, post moves.

Q. Morenike, did you ever think that in your career after coming back from an injury you would come off the bench and be the force you have been late in the year? What do you think about that role?

MORENIKE ATUNRASE: I knew it because, first of all, I sat out and hoped that I wouldn't have to have surgery. And once I decided that I wanted to, by that time it was late in the season, and I knew I would be behind, but I knew I had a lot of competition in front of me.

Coach said, you know, you're going to have to fight for a starting position again. And he told me that, and I could accept that because I knew we had players that could step up and do the same thing that I did, so I've never had a problem

with the role that I'm playing. I'm just glad we're winning. If we're winning, everyone is happy.

A'QUONESIA FRANKLIN: I think we are a better ball club and just the years of experience has helped us. We're smarter, if we just -- you know, the last-second plays, it's not so much the physicalness of the game, it's more mental and how quick on our toes we are.

MORENIKE ATUNRASE: Also I believe that winning the last conference game gave us momentum into the tournament.

Q. Mo, with everybody you've been here, how much have you matured and grown up?

MORENIKE ATUNRASE: I would like to think I have matured mentally a lot and everything that I've gone through has made me a better person and a better player.

Q. Ladies, what's going to be the key tomorrow night? What's going to have to happen for Texas A&M to win the game?

MORENIKE ATUNRASE: I would say our defense. That's what we live and die for every game. We just know once we create pressure on the ball our offense will naturally flow. Andrea Riley, great point guard, she is going to get her points, and we have to make sure that everybody else doesn't go off -- basically our defense, we have to block out, score on easy opportunities.

Q. Even though you guys have only played each other for two years, you and Andrea, can you talk about the premiere point guards in the Big 12 going in the championship head-to-head?

A'QUONESIA FRANKLIN: It's great competition, and she was, like, "I love playing against you because of the competition we have against each other," and it's like that with all the point guards in the league. Especially with me and Tisdale, even though our playing against each other has been going on since AAU; it's great competition between us.

THE MODERATOR: Further questions for our student athletes?

Q. (No microphone.)

COACH BLAIR: Riley was in the hundreds somewhere, so you've got the four best point guards that have developed into great players and

great leaders and they have been rewarded by All-Big 12 performers. The All-Americans are still waiting their turn to come in, but those four point guards in this league are very, very special, and they should be given credit, and it just so happens that the four teams are all our top four teams in the league right now.

You wanted to know what the difference was? We played different styles better this year than what we did last year, playing the GWs and the Iowa States, and early on even when we lost to Wake Forest, we had to play different styles.

We became a smarter basketball team, knowing how to adjust to a box-and-1, triangle-and-2, denial man, jump defenses. We were not smart enough last year to be able to do it on a consistent basis. I think that was -- A&M and Oklahoma State, my first year I was 2-14 and was happy to be 2-14. Kurt was 0-16. Okay? I think that says a lot for these two programs, what we've done.

I think both Kurt and I are good friends, and we're proud of that. What we've done is we've turned the two doormats of the Big 12 -- it's not a worst-to-first, like K State. They were at the bottom last year because of the injury only; they're definitely not the 12th worst team last year, because Gibson was out.

We're proud of that. Then all of the sudden we're playing for the Big 12 championship. Both teams base in attendance has increased. No, it's not up there in the top six either one of us right now, but it's hard to catch the top six because of the tradition of what they've been doing over the years and we're both trying to get there. I think that's one of the biggest stories is the two programs and the direction that we're going.

And both of us -- I might not be as good as Kurt -- Final Four teams? He said that? Gosh, almighty, I guess I'm going to play Tiger in the Master's, too, but I'd rather play Budke on the golf course, even up. But he always wants strokes. He negotiates there.

Q. Talk about Mo. Did you ever think that she would come off the bench and be the valuable 6th man that she has been, especially after being a two-and-a-half year starter and overcoming the injuries?

COACH BLAIR: You become sometimes smarter sitting on the bench, or over on that bicycle pedaling and seeing the game evolve and she's

never had to do that before because she's been on the floor all the way from high school to college.

All of the sudden it was easier for her to make that transition because her best friend took her position, Danielle Gant. Okay? So they were able to accept that and talk about it with no problem at all because -- I told Gant even before Morenike had surgery, she was going to move into the starting lineup, because she's been coming off her 2, and I wanted to change our style of attack earlier in the ballgame, instead of doing what we did in the past.

But Gant was going to go in that starting lineup for someone no matter if Morenike was back or not. Morenike is a proud individual. She came from one of the best high school programs in the country that you've never heard of, Shreveport Southwood that's won 10 out of the last 12 state championships, Alana Beard was there and won 3 of them, Morenike won 2.

Now the guy is still wining and he doesn't have Division 1 players on there. He teaches the game of fundamentals and teaches kids how to share, so it was an easy transition for us. Morenike is going to be a next level player, and a lot of those WNBA scouts left after the first two days, so they don't get a chance to see Morenike, so hopefully they've got that tape on her to see that ballgame of what she did against Texas, or whatever she played to get the 24 points, which she was better in that game than she was last night.

Morenike has so many options. As a coach what you want for your players to be able to make it in life with or without basketball. She will be able to make it. She can go into modeling, she can go into health-related fields, tremendous communicator. I don't think she could go into coaching; she is not tough enough, okay? She's too pretty and she's too nice, but -- she couldn't come into my profession, but she could go into a lot of other professions, because she has compassion.

The other thing that really got her off of that bicycle was Tyra White. Because Tyra White, before she got hurt, was lighting it up in practice, and Morenike was over there pedaling, seeing her career go down the tubes and she was saying, "If I want to be able to compete and help my team this year, I need to have that surgery," and finally she did, a little over two months too late.

But then it just so happened Tyra White

blew her knew the first four minutes of the ballgame while Mo was in rehab after the surgery.

Q. (No microphone.)

COACH BLAIR: I like the Green/Gant match-up more, because Green is more offensive minded and Shaunte is more defensive minded and a great rebounder. Readon guarding Smith and Danielle Green going against Gant will be the two best match-ups. They can flip it up, switch it up or switch on our screens, and we can see the same thing, but I think those will be the two key match-ups in the game, not Riley and A'Quo; they're both going to do their thing, okay, not Starks and Hardeman, because Hardeman is going to jump in her face and play total denial just like everybody else; not Cordero and Micheaux.

It will be decided at the 3-4 position, and I think it's going to be a great match-up, which of those four players can stay out of foul trouble and help their team out on the boards and defense and scoring.

Q. Morenike has in the last couple of games -- the Baylor game and the game last night, she has stepped up. How much is that being a senior and taking over?

COACH BLAIR: Mo coming off the bench is like having Gant come off the bench in the last two years. I've had a lot of luxury, and hopefully I'll have the same thing next year with a couple of kids coming in. To play our system and style you have to have a 6th or a 7th man.

Sometimes it's better to not start your best five, to be able to bring in a kid that can give you that instant fire power. Jerry Stackhouse of the Mavericks, he was playing good -- he's playing with Flip right now -- don't put that down.

That's a key; can you accept that role, because there are so many kids and parents and AAU coaches and high school coaches that cannot accept that role for their kid. I've got kids that will accept that role, and that's why they're at A&M.

Q. How about her reason to play?

COACH BLAIR: It's getting better, because she has struggled in January, and we could see it in February in practice, but it didn't translate into the games. All of the sudden with about three games to go in conference, light switch went on, and instead of her dribbling at her side and not going anywhere, all of the sudden she

looked like a deer going across the -- going through the fields.

She used to bounce that ball to her side and she would take three dribbles to get to him. Okay? And the ball would be there, and she would be so hesitant. I said "Mo, flow!" And we would go over it and over it and over it. And that's the only thing she needs to work on to be the next-level player is her ball handling, and it sure has gotten better in the last couple of weeks.

Q. Gary, what do you think is at stake seedwise?

COACH BLAIR: Correct me, I'm being dumb here, I was writing this down, Michelle will have the answers here. Connecticut, Tennessee, LSU, Rutgers, is that who you got in the first?

Q. (No microphone.)

COACH BLAIR: North Carolina.

Q. (No microphone.)

COACH BLAIR: Okay, I forgot -- that was the other one I was looking for: North Carolina, Connecticut, Tennessee and LSU. That would be mine, and I would go down Rutgers, Maryland, Stanford and whoever wins the game tomorrow, okay?

Whoever wins the game tomorrow. Because you've got to look at it -- it would be a 2-1 split no matter who wins. Even though our RPI is better and all that stuff, they're not going to give me a 2 if I lose.

Whoever wins the game I think is playing for a 2, which would be better for the league. If I got a 2 and I lose tomorrow, I'd feel a little bad, because we hadn't earned it. I'll take it, but at the same time, I think that's what we're playing for. And I think Kurt and I would be very open before the tournament started, you're look at three other teams that were playing for that 2 that were not Oklahoma State and A&M.

It was Kansas State and Baylor and Oklahoma and -- even possible if they would have run the table like they have before. But the Big 12 should be rewarded for its body of work over the year. If you had the No. 1 RPI, then whoever wins this, unless it would have been Missouri or Texas or somebody like that who came up from the bottom, should be rewarded that No. 2 seed.

Now what's going to happen with the 3, 4, 5s, where everybody else is going to go -- the team

that has improved itself the most here has probably been Texas, and Iowa State right behind there. Oklahoma is probably going to drop to a 5, Baylor will hold at a 4 and K State -- I hope they're not penalized because of the injury- - and is it an ACL?

Q. (No microphone.)

COACH BLAIR: Okay. And hopefully they won't be penalized because they're our conference champion, and they shouldn't be penalized because they played in one of the greatest ballgames that's ever been played in Big 12 conference history. They happened to be on the losing end of a ball going around the rim two or three times. That was tough!

Q. As you sit here today, we're talking about No. 2 seeds and tournament championships, and you guys were the reigning Big 12 champs. In the past two years do you look back at the win at OU as y'all's big break-through moment?

COACH BLAIR: That was the biggest road win I've ever had, anytime, anywhere, me personally and also for our program. We did it in front of 12,500, came from behind -- it was a tremendous feeling; we earned it and we deserved it.

The win at Texas this year late in the season was pretty doggone good, and Oklahoma State, second game was pretty good. It's just been a year of -- maybe we were not ready at the first of the year for the so-called eliteness that is coming our way right now. We didn't work hard enough during the summer.

We didn't work hard enough during the preseason. We were sitting and getting our pats on the back, but -- and in this game of basketball or any other sport you better work 12 months a year and keep that attitude about you. We did not do it on a consistent basis. That's my fault as a head coach.

Too many times our kids were complaining about we were too hard on them in October, getting ready, and I think that carried on. As a result by us finally getting them to understand what work hard is all about, it's coming so much easier now, practices -- we can go just as hard, and kids say, "Hey, that's nothing, let's go a little longer, 20 minutes longer."

But earlier in the year we were fighting ourselves as much as how hard we wanted to work to be at the top. We didn't know how to spell those

names, North Carolina, Connecticut, Tennessee, LSU, Rutgers, Maryland and Stanford, and here we were told at the first of the year by the media and the coaches that we were one of those, along with Baylor and Oklahoma. But Baylor and Oklahoma have lived in that eliteness a little longer than we have, and we were not ready, but I think we are now.

Q. Did you have any doubts when you had that rough beginning in the conference season? Did you have any doubts that you guys would be able to get it back together? And if you could give us an update with Tyra White, being a Kansas City kid, an update on the her progress and how much you think she can impact your team next year.

COACH BLAIR: You wanted to know when we were 1-4 -- we were 1-4, we got beat fair and square at home by K State. We got beat by a 3-point shot on the road against Baylor, which we were leading by 2. That hurt, but we knew we played well. We went up to Colorado, which might have been the turning point in our season because we were down 10 with 9 to go, and I put Colson in the ballgame just to try something, and all of the sudden it worked.

Then we lost at Nebraska fair and square. They played well. Then we went home and led the whole way against Oklahoma State and didn't score the last 6:30 in the ballgame, and it wasn't Riley's 3-point shot; it was us and our inability to score in the last 6:30. And they were not scoring every possession.

Our season turned around when we went into the locker room and we looked at ourselves and we had no one to blame but ourselves. And that was the most important thing that our kids could come together on, and they realized it was going to be humble pie. We gotta get it together quick.

The WNIT is an option, but has there ever been a conference champion having to go from being a conference champion going to the WNIT? Don't worry, I'm the only team that's gone from the Final Four to winning the WNIT the next year, and that was at Arkansas last year, but I had an injury that year.

That's the main thing, Michelle, we did not point fingers, we looked at it -- and I said, "I'm not going to change lineups, or drills, we're going to go back to fundamentals in both our warm-up drills

and defensive drills and all we're going to do is play hard."

Because we can slide right back under that radar that we were under, that radar last year when we were beating OU and Baylor and all that, and we handled that very well. Now we're back up on the top. I think we answered a little bit of that when we were able to beat Iowa State yesterday. We can handle success that last year we were not ready for.

As you know, we did not play well in the Big 12 tournament here last year, the year before that, or in the NCAA either year. But I think we've grown up a lot, and I think we're a little bit more mature. Hopefully I'm a better coach, and our kids are a year older and hungrier. They would like to see what those names of those teams are there and what they're all about, because we get to see them every Monday night on TV.

All of the sudden it's not like -- in the NBA -- in the NBA we're going to see all the great West Division teams play. You're not going to get to see Milwaukee play somebody or somebody like that; you're going to see the best of the best. So if you see it every Monday night, you're going to say, "What is it going to take for you to get to that level, maturitywise and then out there on the court?"

Tyra White? She was a homesick kid early in the year, but she's gotten over that. You always get over homesickness if you're playing and playing a lot of minutes. But she's had to learn how to handle the academics. She is doing very well with the tutors that go on the road with us and everything like that. The kids are taking her under their wings, and Sydney Colson and Maryann Baker are two roommates, and they refuse to let a kid get homesick, because they're two Texas kids, they're the life of the party every time, and they have great personalities.

She is going to be an impact player for us, period. She is a 6-foot T.K. Starks, and that's exactly what she is. She can just shoot the ball. She's going through her strength and conditioning, I let her get in the a 3-point shooting contest at the end, and her team, which is my second team, beat our first team in the 3-point shooting contest. She's just enjoying life, 18 years old, trying to find her way through, but she will be an impact player for us, either at the 2 or the 3 position.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, we appreciate your comments. Thank you.

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