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An interview with:

OKLAHOMA COACH JEFF CAPEL

PETER IRWIN: We are now joined by Coach Jeff Capel from Oklahoma.

Coach, welcome. Your thoughts about the season.

COACH CAPEL: First of all, good morning to everyone. I'm excited to be here. Last time I was here was a very good weekend for us. In the NCAA tournament. And it's great to have the Big 12 tournament back here in Kansas City.

I'm excited about our season. We're a very different looking team, but we're a talented basketball team. These guys have worked extremely hard in the summer and our preseason workout. And now as we've started practice.

We've had six practices, and they've really gotten after it. I like what I think this team can become, but it's going to take a lot of work. But, again, we have the pieces. It's just a matter of those pieces working together and putting them in situations to be successful.

So we're excited about it and are anxious to get started playing.

Q. Jeff, talk about Tiny and especially Tommy Mason-Griffin. Most people focus on Tiny as your top newcomer, but Tommy's going to be quite a contributor, is he not?

COACH CAPEL: Well, I think that -- I think Willie Warren is one of the best guards in the country. Tommy Mason-Griffin has been as good as anyone in practice for us first six days. He's been that good.

I knew he was good coming out of high school. One of the things I thought about Tommy was I thought he had a large room to grow to get better. Same thing with Tiny.

Once those guys got into a situation where they were forced to work consistently, and that's where they are right now. And because of that, Tommy's made a little bit bigger jump right now than Tiny. Tiny's coming, and tiny's very talented. He's worked to get his weight in check. He's at 290. He was 360 going into his senior year. He's at 290.

We weighed him on Sunday. He's 290 pounds. He's awfully proud of that. He's very talented. Has an incredible skill set.

One of the things with Tiny -- as with all freshmen -- they have to get used to the speed of the college game and the sense of urgency that you have to have in the understanding of how important every possession is. But those two give us a lot to work with immediately.

Q. Jeff, given the versatility of Tiny, will you have to battle with him a little bit to make him play in the blocks as opposed to outside sometimes?

COACH CAPEL: You must have seen Tiny play somewhere.

You know, that is something -- he is a versatile guy. He can do a lot of different things. One of the things he can do is shoot the basketball. But it is something that we have to remind him of, or we've had to remind him of so far is don't fall in love with just being on the perimeter because you are 6'9". You do have a 7'4" wingspan, and you are 290 pounds. And to use that.

I haven't seen any 6'9", 290 pound shooting guards out there. LeBron is close, but, you know, by any means, he's not LeBron. There's only one of those guys walking the face of the earth.

It is something that we've had to remind him, and I keep using the word "had," past tense. Hopefully it's not something, as we get into November and December and January and February, that we don't have to continually remind him of that.

Q. When you look at your First Team All-Big 12, do you look at that as an All-American team as well?

COACH CAPEL: Yes.

Q. Coach Self was saying this is probably the most talented he recalls in the Big 12.

COACH CAPEL: Absolutely. If you look at -- you know, I think -- I really haven't looked at it or how it was vote. I know how I voted. And so if you look at Sherron Collins, you're talking about, in my opinion, the best point guard in college basketball.

When you look at Willie, I think he's the best off-guard or combo guard, whatever you want to call him, in college basketball.

James Anderson is certainly one of the best wing guys in college basketball.

And then, again, I voted Craig Brackins. I think Craig Brackins is one of the most underrated guys.

Then in Aldrich, you have possibly the best center, I think, best center in college basketball. And then you have guys right there that have a chance.

And we have an awfully, awfully good freshman class and newcomer class in this league.

So it is incredibly talented. Again, like I've said since I've been here, there's some great coach ins this league. Because of the talent level that our league has been able to attract, it makes the basketball a very, very high level.

Q. Tony Crocker's here, a senior. He's kind of the last man standing of a recruiting class that -- when you got to Norman. Talk about him and his maturation up to this season.

COACH CAPEL: You know, Crocker will always have a special place for me because he's the only one that stayed.

You know, that was a difficult time when all that stuff happened when I first got here. We've talked about that. But Crocker's had a good career so far, and I hope he has a great senior year.

You know, he's stronger now. He finished our preseason conditioning at about 215 pounds. He lowered his body fat, improved his vertical, was more explosive and quicker.

Now yesterday was the first time he practiced. We've had a little flu thing going on with our team. He's been out. Yesterday was the first time. So I don't know how much weight he lost or

things like that. But we need him to be more consistent.

And one of the things I challenged him with at the end of last season was, in my opinion, in order to become more consistent, you need to work more consistently. You need to do the things that you can control on a more consistent basis, getting in and working on your game. So we'll see if he's done that.

Q. Jeff, how did Willie, in the times that he did, develop as a player and a person when he had to defer to Blake?

COACH CAPEL: We never wanted him to defer to Blake. That was the first thing. That's something we talked about with him during the recruiting process and while he was here.

There would be times in practice where I would literally be screaming at Willie in practice, you know: I didn't bring you here to defer. I brought you here to be a difference maker. And I thought he was that last year.

Now, there were times when, you know, he maybe tried to defer, and we tried everything we can to get him to not do that.

But he's grown up a lot. I think seeing how Blake handled everything last year is going to be very important for him. When you look at him -- I don't know if you'll be able to tell it today, you know, without a jersey on, but he looks different. You know, he's gotten stronger. You know, he's in really, really good shape right now. He looks more mature.

And because he's worked like that, he carries himself in a different way now.

And I know there were a lot of things said about Willie when he first came to college and came to OU, he had a reputation. One of the things I've shared with him is that sometimes you can never shake that, but you can control what you can control. And he's done that.

Since he's been at OU, we've had absolutely no problems at all with him. Really, there were no problems with him in high school, nothing off the floor, nothing academically. It was just a perception that people had of him.

You know, when you're good, sometimes you get that. And when you're good and you know you're good, which he knows he's a good player. I like that about him, and I like the way he's matured.

Today is his 20th birthday. So we're

excited about that. I think he's going to have a great year for us.

Q. Jeff, can you just talk about shaping a team's personality and identity after losing a guy who -- you know, the best player in the country last year.

COACH CAPEL: Well, it's work, and it starts really as soon as the season is over with. As soon as last season was over with, we started.

You know, it was -- I don't mean this to try to sound funny, but it wasn't a surprise to us that Blake was leaving. We knew it when he decided to come back that it was going to be his last year.

You know, it's something we started trying to do when the season was over with. I think one of the things is Willie has really stepped up in the leadership department. Again, I think it was so great for him to be able to watch everything that happened last year, watch how Blake prepared for everything, watch how he handled everything.

You know, some of the cheap shots we took -- he took last year. Some of the things that people did to him or tried to do to him.

The thing that Willie took from that is, again, how Blake kept his cool, but most importantly, how he prepared.

I've said this to people, and when NBA people call me, Blake Griffin is obsessed with being great. When you talk about obsession, there's a fine line there with a little bit insane. And he has that in a great way.

I think some of that has rubbed off on Willie. You know, Blake -- we would practice at 3:30 on the weekdays. At 2:30 I didn't have to look out my window to see. When I heard that bounce every day at 2:30, I knew who it was.

Now all of a sudden, that's happened in our first six days -- now, I hope it doesn't change -- but that guy is Willie Warren now. Staying after practice getting extra work.

So I think him seeing that -- and all of our guys, our returning guys seeing that, has helped.

And then seeing Taylor do that and to see Taylor make the Phoenix Suns roster. So it started when our season was over with. All of our guys were there this summer, including our freshmen. And so the team-building process starts right there.

Now, I can't do anything with it, but our players do it. And once we start up in August, we start doing some things. We do a lot of things together as a team to try to build that.

Q. Jeff, along the same lines, when you have a team that last year had the comfort level of knowing if things were kind of falling apart on the court, Blake could kind of rescue them. That's not there anymore. Do you sense that these guys will step into their roles that they need to to take over a game when necessary?

COACH CAPEL: It's interesting you say that because we talked about that the other day as a team. We don't have a huge margin for error.

Last year we could maybe get away with some things because, I call it, we had big brother there to bail them out. He's gone now. But we do have other really good players now.

I think the thing our guys have to understand right now is how much we need each other. Even though we had Blake last year, I thought Blake did a great job of -- he did a great job of reminding the guys of that, of how much we all needed each other.

Our guys understand that now. So screening is going to be more important. Communication is going to be more important. Guys really embracing their roles is going to be more important. And so far we've done that.

Now, we haven't faced any adversity yet. So far our guys have had a great attitude and a great spirit about practice. Hopefully, that's something that continues when we get knocked in the face, when we face some kind of adversity.

Q. I hate to look ahead, but November 21st is kind of a special game for you guys. You face Virginia Commonwealth. What are your thoughts on that game?

COACH CAPEL: You kind of threw me off when you said the date. I didn't know what that was about. Coaches don't look that far ahead.

You know, I'm excited about it. Obviously, VCU is and always will be a special place to me. You know, my plight to becoming a head coach is way different than anyone that I've ever even heard of and incredibly unique, and it's all because of that place, because they believed in me. They saw something in me when I didn't -- wasn't even looking for it at the time.

Now it's different now because some of those people aren't there. The athletic director that hired me is not there anymore. The president that hired me is not there anymore. The players that I coached when I was there, there's only one left, and he redshirted my last year there.

So it is different, but the fans are the same. I know it's going to be a rowdy environment. And it's a very tough place to play. And they'll have a really good team.

But, you know, it's a game we have to play. Hopefully, it's a game we win. I'm going there to win. I'm not going there for a homecoming. I'm going there to try to get a win. We can do homecoming stuff afterwards. If we win.

Q. Jeff, that period when Blake was out with a concussion, how do you think that what Willie learned in that stretch will carry over to this year?

COACH CAPEL: Well, that was a different period because it wasn't something you can prepare for. You know, what happened -- I can't remember what mark it was in the first half against Texas. I knew right then that he wasn't coming back. You know, I think maybe there was still some hope in our locker room that he could come back the second half.

But I knew when I looked at him. We saw him in the huddle. I don't know if a lot of people saw him in the huddle, but we knew right there. I'm walking off at halftime, and I think I was talking to Erin Andrews, and I happened to look out the side, and he looked like a wobbly boxer.

Willie was tremendous in the second half of that game. He almost single-handedly won that game for us. I think he had 24 in the second half. If Abrams misses just one of those shots, perhaps we win that game.

But then you come back and less than 48 hours later, we're playing Kansas. There was really not a lot of time to prepare because it was such a hard-fought battle, such a physical game down there in Austin that when we came back on Sunday, we literally just walked through everything.

A couple of years ago, Blake's freshman year, when we played at Oklahoma State, we had a chance to prepare without Blake. We had a whole week to prepare after he had surgery on Sunday. And our guys were very prepared, and you saw, you know, we were able to go down to Stillwater and win that game.

Hopefully, with having a season right now to prepare, or preseason to prepare, that makes Willie even more better. He understands how to pick his spots better and different ways to attack. But certainly -- you know, look, I think he's going to have a great year. I really and truly do. He's

worked at it. I think he's earned the right to have a great year. And he's a special talent.

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