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An interview with:

OKLAHOMA STATE COACH TRAVIS FORD

THE MODERATOR: We are now joined by Travis Ford from Oklahoma State.

Coach, welcome. And your thoughts on the upcoming season.

COACH FORD: Thank you. Great to be here today. Excited about this season.

You know, when you look at our basketball team, and I think we are, from what I understand, probably the youngest team in the league. Our average age is like 19 years old. We have seven new players.

And when you say that, you would think that we're probably in our rebuilding stage when you bring in seven new players, but we're not really approaching it that way because of the returning players we have and the backbone of our team.

When you look at guys like James Anderson, Obi Muonelo, Keiton Page, Marshall Moses, these guys who are returning who are going to be the backbone of our team, we think we have a chance to have a very fun and exciting year.

Yes, we are going to have to rely on some of these new players, we're placing them to get minutes, but from what I've seen the last four or five days of practice, I think we have a chance. Matt Pilgrim, one of our new players, has been in college. This will be his fourth year in college. He's a very experienced player who will step in and play right away for us at 6'8", 245, the most athletic player on our team and the strongest player on our team. So he's going to step in and play significant minutes.

We really like the balance of new guys with returning players. We really like the balance. You know, I don't think it's every coach's plan to bring in seven new players, but that kind of happens when

you take over a program. The first couple of years, different things happen.

But we're looking forward to it. We're excited. All the players. We think we've improved ourselves in every area, except maybe the point guard spot. James Anderson has gotten better. Keiton Page has gotten better. Marshall Moses has gotten better. We've gotten better at each spot. Obviously, when you lose a four-year starter in Byron Eaton, you're just not going to replace him overnight.

Q. You anticipated my question about your point guard. You signed two pretty highly regarded kids. How have they looked so far?

COACH FORD: They've been very competitive in practice. It's typical of any freshmen. I think the physical tools are there, just the mental aspect of having to play at this level. So much being thrown at you one time is a lot to handle.

But, you know, I think we brought in Ray Penn, Fred Gulley, even Reger Dowell from Arkansas. All of these guys can play the point guard spot. Reger is probably more of a combo guard. Can play more the two. And Ray Penn has more of a complete game than any of them right now.

Ray has been very impressive in practice, being able to score the basketball. Really distributing and finding the open man and playing at a high level of speed. And being able to play at that high level of speed and making good decisions.

He's probably physically -- even though he's 5'9", he's physically very, very strong. He's probably got the most complete package right now. Even though Fred Gulley is really push him at that spot.

And then even Keiton Page can play that spot. Keiton Page backed up Byron Eaton last year at the point guard spot and really did a very good job of it. Even though Keiton is a natural two guard, and that's the position we would like for him to play mostly. But if we needed somebody with

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experience who we -- you know, I have no question mark can Keiton do it; it's just we'd like to get him at that two guard spot.

I think as we put Keiton Page and Ray Penn out there, you're extremely dangerous from the perimeter. And I'm going to say James Anderson, those three guys. I don't think there's a better three-guard shooting lineup in the country. These three guys in practice, you know, we haven't worked on offense very much in the first five or six practices I have. I've approached it differently than I ever had in coaching.

But it's tough for us to work on defense because these guys just shoot the ball unbelievable. It makes us very dangerous from the perimeter when you have these three guys on the perimeter. And Obi Muonelo is a great shooter as well who plays the four spot. He's going to play more of a wing -- not more, but some wing position this year. It makes us very dangerous the way we play.

Q. Travis, because of the -- considering the strength of the league, did you know that you were getting into when you came here? And what are your observations about the Big 12?

COACH FORD: I knew what I was getting into. Big 12 is always very good. Obviously, I think this is an elite year, no question about it. From top to bottom and then you look at all the individual talent in our league and how so many players made the commitment -- sacrificed to come back to their schools. The James Andersons, the Sherron Collins, Brackins, Willie Warren. You can go down the line.

This is a very special year, there's no question. I've been doing all the Kiwanis and rotaries and all that stuff we do, and I've been telling our fans, you'd better get your jackets because, when January gets here, you're not going to want to miss this because night in, night out, you're going to see very competitive, great basketball from top to bottom, every single team.

And every night in and night out, you're going to be witness three to four to five NBA players on the court, and there's going to be great talent out there.

So, absolutely, it's exciting to be a part of it. On the other hand, it definitely keeps you up at night. There's no question.

Q. Can you talk about Obi Muonelo, your lone senior, and the leadership qualities he's brought to the team so far this year.

COACH FORD: Well, Obi is, I think, a natural leader when it comes to work ethic. I don't know if I've ever coached a player that puts in the time Obi Muonelo puts in.

He's the one player that, when I came to work this summer in June and get there -- I get there maybe at 8:00. He's already been there at 5:30 in the morning getting so many jump shots up on his own. Not something we have to tell him to do.

You know, he's just a natural worker. No question about it. And he leads by example that way. Our players, our new players have seen how he goes about his daily habits of preparing his body, whether it be stretching or getting in extra shots before practice, after practice, getting extra time on a treadmill, whatever it may be. His body is just -- he really approaches the game the way we would like every player to approach it.

So he leads by example in that way. You know, Obi, last year I put him in a position he'd never been before. We asked him to be a 6'4" four man, and he had great success at it. And he's going to do the same thing this year. He's going to play, yes, a lot of four, but we're also going to be able to move him to some three a little bit because of the addition of Matt Pilgrim and some other guys, and let him play that position.

He's a phenomenal shooter. His work ethic is contagious to our other players. And we're looking forward to Obi having a great senior season because of his leadership and because he puts his time in.

Q. Point guard, is that the toughest position for a freshman to come in and have to work at right away?

COACH FORD: It probably is. You know, it probably is in every system, but especially in our system where we ask them to do so much. And probably tougher on my point guards than I am anybody.

It is tough because the ball is in your hands, and you've got to make decisions. It's tough this year because you're replacing a great player in Byron Eaton. And, yes, I do bring up Byron's name almost every day.

Some people say, well, you know, don't. Our players know about Byron, and they know

what he led our team in last year and how he led our team at the end of the year and the things he did for us.

We want -- you know, a lot of the attributes Byron had, we want our point guards to pick up some of those. We want him to be our own type player, but it's especially tough this year because they are taking over a four-year starter. It's a system where the ball is in your hands a lot, and we ask you to make plays.

We've got guys -- people have asked me, it's always been the number one question. Who's going to play the point guard spot? That's the biggest question mark of your team.

Well, for me, yes, it is a question mark because I'm not even sure yet. It's not an overly big concern that those two go together. I'm not for sure who's going to do it yet, but I'm not overly concerned about it. Why am I not concerned about it? Because James Anderson, Keiton Page, Obi Muonelo, Marshall Moses. These guys are going to allow someone to learn the position a little bit.

Yes, they're going to have to get out there and perform, but they're not going to have to be Byron Eaton from day one or even this year at all. We don't expect that. But we want them to get out there and get James the ball, get Obi the ball, get Keiton the ball. Pick up full court defensively. And if you're open, knock down a shot. You don't have to create every play like Byron did.

We're going to be patient with that position, but I've been very happy with Ray Penn and Fred Gulley and Keiton and Reger and those guys. It's just going to be a work in progress a little bit, and I'm going to have to be the number one guy being patient.

You know, the biggest -- the thing about this point guard spot, Ray Penn has got all the physical tools. Fred's got the physical tools. They just don't have the mental tool of it yet. And that's the greatest challenge of it, understanding how difficult it is to play at this level.

Not just the games yet, that's hard enough, but in practice. We've gone two-a-days and stuff like that. I can tell after the first practice when I say, all right, let's be dressed and ready to go again at 3:00. You can see their eyes kind of pop up, what? We've got to go again? They don't understand the commitment yet and how difficult it is to play at this level. And how committed you have to be at it.

That's the biggest challenge of teaching these younger point guards and getting them to be

leaders because it's not natural for them to come in and be a leader surrounded by all these older players that they're going to be playing with. We're telling Ray and these guys, don't be afraid to speak up and talk to James. Don't be afraid to speak up.

I don't know if you can tell them what to do yet, but you can encourage them and talk to them and be outspoken. I like my point guards to be outspoken. Byron Eaton was very outspoken. I like my point guards to have a personality. I want them to have a personality.

And that's the part we're trying to develop with these guys right now. Develop a personality. They got the physical tools. They're working extremely hard. They've got that down really. How hard you've got to work. They've just got to develop that mental aspect that I want out of it.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thank you very much. Best of luck.

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