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An Interview With:

OKLAHOMA COACH SHERRI COALE

THE MODERATOR: Okay. We're finally down to Coach Sherri Coale from Oklahoma. Your opening thoughts and then questions.

COACH COALE: I want to thank everyone for being here today for Media Day and staying around. I think we're the end of the day. So thank you guys for enduring. And also I want to say how much we miss Coach Bill Fennelly not being here today. I know all our thoughts and prayers are with him, and just a dear friend, and his absence is noted today.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. A lot of new faces and names and people maybe in bigger roles this year. Can you kind of maybe tell us what to look for that we don't know to look for, because they're new?

COACH COALE: Yeah, I think that probably speaks to that void that has been left by the graduation of Danielle Robinson, as much as anything. That's what that question leads to.

But we have four incoming freshmen who I'm so excited about. They have just been -- they've been so fun to work with. And I feel like I always say that I really like my team and I typically always do like my team.

I might almost be in love with these guys. They're just so earnest. You know, I can't think of a better word to describe, particularly this freshman class. They're just earnest.

They want to do things right. They want to be good. They want to play well. They each have individual strengths that set them apart and differentiate them from one another. One player from the Kansas City area that you'll be hearing a lot about that will make an impact is DaShawn Harden. She's an especially gifted offensive

player. Probably the best passer we've had at Oklahoma, maybe since Stacey Dales.

She has a unique way of seeing what's happening on the floor and being able to deliver the basketball to the spot it needs to go to.

I think she's going to really make an impact. And obviously in that void created by Danielle, she being a guard, she'll have an opportunity to do that.

Maybe the surprise of the group will be freshman from Spencer, Oklahoma, Sharane Campbell, from Star Spencer High School, right in the middle of Oklahoma City.

I say "surprise" because she didn't play a lot of AAU basketball. She wasn't really on the summer circuit, didn't play in the Nike Showcase event. So there's a lot of people across the country that don't know about her. Kurt Budke will tell you he knows about her.

Those of us who are regional, everybody there pretty well knows who Sharane Campbell is. But across the country that won't be a household name. And I'll tell you what, she's going to be special. She's really going to be special.

She's strong. She's explosive. She's athletic. And she's a smart kid who really, really wants to get better. She's just a sponge. And she's just been really, really fun to watch grow just in the first couple of weeks that we've been together.

And then the other two freshmen, Kaylon Williams from Midwest City, Oklahoma, and Katherine Zander from Orange Park, Florida. They're both 6'3", but they're very different 6'3" kind of players. And I think both of them will make an impact in their own right. Those are the four new guys.

We only have -- of the 13 players on our roster, four are freshmen, four are sophomores. So we're all pretty young guys. There will be a lot of different names and faces.

Q. We've heard all kinds of coaches come up today and say this is the best women's basketball league in the country, and

you've had a lot of success year after year. How do you maintain a level of success each and every season when the competition is so stiff?

COACH COALE: You know, the crazy thing about it is the stiff competition is actually one of the things that allows us to maintain that high level of play.

That little saying as the water rises so do the boats. You compete. You compete and great players want to come and they want to be a part of this conference where we compete against one another.

So I think success breeds success and we all continue to draw great athletes who want to be a part of this environment.

Q. Sherri, obviously Whitney Hand means a lot to your program. She's battled back from a lot of adversity. Could you talk about what she's given you and exactly where is she physically? Is she back to being the Whitney Hand of a couple of years ago?

COACH COALE: You know, if I really answered that question thoroughly, you guys would not make your deadlines and it would be dark before we left here, because if you asked me to tell you what Whitney Hand means to Oklahoma basketball, my friend, that will take a while.

I can tell you, however, that she has -- she's healed. She's moving well. She looks much more like the Whitney Hand that you guys saw as a true freshman. I don't think any of us really realized, even though those of us on the inside knew the pain she was in last year, I don't know that any of us really realized how difficult that is to play through.

What I see now, when I watch Whitney on the floor, is a kid who is really comfortable in her own skin as a basketball player again, and I don't think she was ever comfortable at any moment last year, not physically or mentally, because they're all connected, obviously.

Having her back and healthy is a huge breath of air for everyone. And, you know, her greatest gift is she makes the guys around her better. When you have eight underclassmen on your team, her presence becomes more important and her play even more integral. So we're loving having her healthy and having her spirit infuse all those young guys.

And she really is. If there was a poster child for Oklahoma women's basketball, I'd probably want it to be Whitney Hand.

Q. We've talked a lot about all of this conference realignment junk. I'd much more rather talk about basketball players and basketball games than this stuff. And I'm sure you would, too. How frustrating has it been for you to not have a real idea at some point where OU was going to end up, what other teams are going to be in the conference with you and to have so little control over what's going to happen with all of this?

COACH COALE: You know, that's a great question. And I haven't had it phrased quite that way before. As I think about it, I think probably when all of us look back at this time in collegiate athletics, maybe in 20 years we'll look back and this will be a very historical time. It's a pivotal time for collegiate sports.

If I were someone on the outside looking in, watching it all transpire, I might think, oh, my gosh, this is fascinating. But I'm not on the outside. I'm not a voyeur for all this. My world is directly affected by the decisions that are made. It's far less fascinating and far more repugnant, actually.

I feel like student-athlete welfare is not a myth. It's real. And when it's real, then it has to be applied to each and every situation. It's not just something that a committee or a cabinet or coach's group even can throw around and say stand for this in the name of student-athlete welfare.

If student-athlete welfare is real, then it applies to the amount of time we can spend practicing every week and it applies to the amount of time we take them out of class and applies to what we do with their lives. When you start breaking conferences apart and playing all your games in different time zones, what does that do to a student-athlete's life and their welfare. That's been the frustrating part of it, because our mission, at the end of the day, is to educate students and we want to be able to do that in the best possible manner.

Q. Along those lines, a lot was made this morning about how people aren't going to play Texas A&M anymore. Kim was very adamant that it's a messy divorce and you don't sleep with the person you get divorced from anymore.

COACH COALE: Thank you for catching me up. (Laughter.)

Q. Along those lines, you've been a huge, huge proponent for growing the game, growing the sport. **A,** would you still play A&M once they're gone? **And, B,** is that just sad for women's basketball, the same way Tennessee and UConn don't play anymore, if A&M and Baylor don't play anymore, or Kansas, whoever it may be, just for the sport of women's hoops how this affects it?

COACH COALE: I think this is tough for our sport. I think all of college athletics, really, is bound by those traditional, regional, institutional rivalries. And when you take geography out of it, you lose a lot.

Texas A&M and Baylor's a great rivalry. I think we have a great rivalry with Baylor and have had one with A&M as well as Oklahoma State and Texas.

So when you play in a league that has the strength that the women's basketball conference or the Big 12 Conference and women's basketball has, you don't want to see that broken up, for any reason. And that's not good for the game.

At the end of the day, however, while conference realignment is about many things, women's basketball is not particularly one of them. So we don't get a say in that.

Whether or not I would play A&M, here's the way I look at that. We all as head coaches are responsible for building a schedule that will put our team in the best possible position to do well in the NCAA Tournament. We want to win conference championships, but we all want to get to March Madness, and we want to play and play on.

So we build schedules that give us the very best opportunity to do that. One of the things you have to look at is the strength of your conference schedule.

When you go out of conference to play games, every single night you can't be playing a team ranked in the top 10 in the country. So there has to be a balance there. We currently play Connecticut. We've not been shy.

We take all-comers. We play Tennessee. We have Ohio State on the schedule this year. You can't play all those guys at once. Can't play all those guys every single year. So I think it will be something that will probably be determined by the squad and the year, by what the Big 12 Conference looks like and what your preconference agreements are.

Q. In some ways you guys had to play bigger than you were a lot last year. You are bigger this year, but it's some inexperienced kids maybe that will have to do more. And you've won with a lot of different styles. Is this year going to be different than last year and different than the year before even?

COACH COALE: You know, I think it will be different, definitely, than last year, because the one thing that we will not have is Danielle Robinson creating about ten points a game in transition just because nobody is fast enough to get in front of the basketball.

That's gone. While we'll get somebody else to play the point, it will not be in that manner. Any of the candidates that we have, that is not their MO. So, yeah, it will be different.

I love the fact that Nicole Griffin, in particular, got significant time last year throughout conference play.

I thought she played arguably her best basketball of the year in March, in the postseason. And that buoyed her over the summer and the fall and she comes in with a great sense of confidence.

Jelena Cerina has now been with our program for a year, junior college transfer, as a senior. She's more seasoned. She knows what to expect. So our bigs have more experience than they had last year.

But you're right, there's lots of ways to win, and we'll figure out what the best form of that is for this year's particular team.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.
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