

October 19, 2011



An Interview With:

TEXAS A&M COACH GARY BLAIR

THE MODERATOR: We're now joined by Coach Gary Blair from Texas A&M. Coach, your opening comments.

COACH BLAIR: We're taking you with us to the SEC. Another pretty face like me.

THE MODERATOR: Just old faces, Gary.

COACH BLAIR: We're looking forward to defending the national championship. You don't talk about winning another one until you defend it the way a champion should.

And I think that's our goal this year. Our kids are practicing hard. We're relatively healthy right now.

But the most important thing, I haven't defended a whole lot of national championships before. But at the same time you feel good about yourself, you feel good about your accomplishments, but soon as you sit back and reflect on it, somebody's going to kick you in the butt and pass you by.

And that's how talented this league is, and then the non-conference schedule that we're playing, and I'm just excited to get started. We've only been working out a week. We waited until last Sunday night to get started after we got back from the White House because we didn't want to break up a three-day thing.

Plus I didn't want to give -- the way the rule reads, 40 days and gotta take 10 off. That's not me. I'd rather start with about 33 days and give them about six or seven days off.

But we're happy. I'll open it up for questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. If you would, could you just talk about the last year Kansas City kids that's on your roster and in what ways do you feel like

Tyra is going to provide some leadership for this team and give you a chance to make a tighter run?

COACH BLAIR: Kansas City, personally, is my second home. It's been good to me, all the way back when I was at Arkansas and we were in the Final Four here in Kansas City. We didn't stay long because we ran into Tennessee.

But at the same time, signing Tanisha Smith and Danielle Adams and Tyra White, that's really been a huge change in our program. Three impact players, all from the Kansas City, Missouri, side, and they were all special to our program.

Tyra, going into her senior year, she's feeling good about herself. She had to miss four weeks of preseason with a hot spot on her foot. But she's rounding into shape now.

The shot still looks like Tyra's shot. It hasn't changed a bit. I just think if you could see the evolution of her from a freshman homesick, not sure what she wanted to do to where she is now, a very confident young lady, looking to graduate in May, looking to go into the WNBA and eventually she said in her thing she's looking to do what you guys do. She'd like to write for a publication.

I don't think you'll ever have a microphone in front of her. She doesn't want to talk too much about it. But her goal is to write about it.

And she's a very special young lady, very self-serving, where -- those aren't the words. Very conscientious of the team aspect of the game on how she'll give up the ball and everything like that and she'll take the right shot. That's why her shooting percentage is so good all the time. Not because of the high release, but because she never takes a bad shot.

She'll give it up if she does not have the shot that is needed at the time. And I think when you particularly saw the Stanford game, when she hit the winning shot and the shot against Notre Dame, when she nailed that 3 there on the second option of an inbounds play, she knew what was expected, and she wanted that ball in that situation.

But she's a winner. I'm proud of her and

hopefully she'll have the senior year that we think she deserves, and it will give Kansas City also a great boost having a player from Kansas City contribute and come back here for the Big 12 Tournament.

Q. You mentioned that you don't have the experience of defending a national championship. This is new to you. What are the unique challenges you anticipate that you'll face being the defending champion as opposed to pursuing a title?

COACH BLAIR: Well, that little crystal ball right there is not big enough compared to the bull's eye that's going to be on us.

We don't run from competition. We run to competition. And we're facing another great non-conference schedule and everything.

And obviously we're not going to go through that non-conference schedule undefeated or the conference schedule undefeated. That giant bull's eye is on our back. We know it. We expect it and we relish it.

We've been the hunter for a long time. Now it's nice to be on the other end that they're chasing us right now. But that's yesterday's team. We've got this year's team that we have to adjust.

We're not the front runner in our own conference pick this year. And that's fine with us. We like staying under that radar. But if we lose a game this year before they get to the dressing room, those assistant coaches will be dialing their recruits. We just knocked off the national champion. Don't worry, my assistants will be doing the same thing if the shoe was reversed. That's what you do in recruiting.

When you are hot, you have got to make sure the kids and the right people around you know what you've just accomplished. That's the way the sport is right now.

But defending it, it's an honor. It's an honor. Look at what the Big 12 teams have done just in the last three years. Texas, Oklahoma. I'm sorry, Baylor, Oklahoma and ourselves have been to the Final Four. Okay? Oklahoma's been there three times in the last eight years.

Baylor's been there twice. We've been there once. That says a lot about the depth of the Big 12. I'm proud of the Big 12 and my brothers and sisters who coach in the league.

Q. Obviously two big losses from your starting lineup when you look at Danielle Adams, you look at Sydney Colson. Now you

have Kelsey Bone coming out up front. Could you talk about her maybe fitting into Danielle's spot and also your point guard situation right now?

COACH BLAIR: Kelsey Bone will be able to fit into it, but what I have to tell her every day: She's not Danielle Adams and get away from that 3-point line. But she still thinks she wants to slide out there.

And I'll ask her about her stats at South Carolina, and I'll ask her about do you want to shoot 60 percent, then stay within eight to ten feet of the basket and knock down a couple of 15-, 16-footers but you be the best that Kelsey Bone can be.

But she's having good competition right now in practice with -- Karla Gilbert's playing very well, and our freshman plays well about every other five to ten minutes and back to being a freshman.

But we've got size right now. Point guard position, work under progress, and it's going to be that way all the year. I just imagine we'll share that position with Adrienne Pratcher, the junior, and Alexia Standish, the freshman. Right now they're about even through a week of practice.

I always have my ace in the hole of moving Sydney Carter over to the point, and we would become a lot taller at the wing position when we do that.

Q. You talked about having the target on your back. And last week we talked to Michael Cooper out at USC he's chomping at the bit to come to College Station and test his legendary defensive skills against you guys. How excited are you to match up with a team with a defensive agenda?

COACH BLAIR: Best news is Michael Cooper is not going to have to guard me, because that would be pretty easy. That's about as good as my dancing ability as my basketball playing. He's bringing back the Gilbert kids. They're from Houston. And then we're going to USC next year to be able to take one of our kids back in that area.

I think that's what programs of the high level should be able to do, not run from competition or be upset that I didn't get to sign the Gilbert kids or the kids that went to Stanford; relish the opportunity to bring them back and playing them in your building. And we will do that.

And I'm looking forward to playing USC.

Back when we were at Louisiana Tech and Kim Mulkey was our point guard, it was Louisiana Tech and USC competing for the national championships, and that was just tremendous competition.

And we love those matchups. And I think that's where we are in women's basketball, the top teams need to play each other, not run from each other.

Q. Along those lines, a lot was made this morning about you guys leaving the conference and teams not wanting to play you anymore. And would it be sad for women's basketball if there is no Texas A&M and Baylor matchup or Texas A&M and Oklahoma matchup or whatever?

COACH BLAIR: That would not be my choice. We'll play anybody in the Big 12 who wants to play us as long as it's going to better our RPI schedule and if I'm taking recruits back into that area.

We'll play anybody, anytime. And that would be like if Missouri was there and I had those three Kansas City players, I'd love to be able to play Missouri.

But it takes two to dance. And I'm not going to get in and be the wordsmith with Kim or anything on how she feels. That's out of our hands as basketball coaches. All that decision and changing of conferences -- last year, everybody loved us. This year, now everybody says we're the villain.

But I'm not going to get into that because it's all about football. It has nothing to do with women's basketball, equestrian or anything else. It's about football. It's about television sets. It's about money and it's about egos.

We're going to do what we're expected to do. We're going to play the best celled we can. And when I was in the SEC for 10 years, that was the top women's basketball conference for those 10 years. Now that we've been into the Big 12, the Big 12 in the last six years has been by far the best women's basketball conference top to bottom. And I think it will continue to be that way, particularly this year. I think we're that solid 1 through 10 in this league.

So my phone number hasn't changed. I'll play anybody at any time. I think the people that are going to miss it are the fans. We have a lot of good friends and good fans there at Waco, just like we do at College Station, just like they have at Texas.

And I understand the feelings of everybody. A lot of it, not playing could be said it's going to be for recruiting. Okay. Throw all that other hogwash out the window. It's for recruiting.

But there are about -- correct me if I'm wrong, Peter -- 12 other Division I schools in the state of Texas, and I think a lot of them will be glad to play Texas A&M.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

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