

October 20, 2011



An Interview With

KANSAS COACH BILL SELF

THE MODERATOR: Coach, welcome and your thoughts on the upcoming season.

COACH SELF: First of all, I hope you guys are as excited as I am to be here at 8:00 this morning. But I'm excited about our team. I'm excited about our league. Our team is totally different. We lost six key players off of a pretty good team last year, and recruited fairly well, but didn't get a chance to coach all the guys we recruited due to some NCAA academic situations.

So we're a very thin team. We're a thin team that's pretty talented. But certainly less margin for error, because we don't have the depth that we had in years past.

But the league will be terrific at the end. Probably as much parity as there has ever been, and playing a round-robin I think will definitely take away from the great won/loss record. I think you'll see the team that wins the league had more losses this year in March probably because the schedules will be so much tougher.

THE MODERATOR: Questions.

Q. Because of the personnel that you've lost, Coach, is it going to be more difficult for you to determine who will provide leadership on the team this year? Is it going to be kind of like last year where any one person can step up on a given night and be your floor leader?

COACH SELF: Well, I think that one thing about having reduced numbers, it forces guys into roles. And, no question, Tyshawn Taylor will be the leader of our team. And Thomas Robinson will be kind of the emotional leader of our team. Ty has done a great job, paid his dues. He's really learned how to communicate by not only getting on guys, but talking to them and teaching them.

And I think night in and night out those two should be constants. Now, they may not always play well, but I think they care so much, they've been around long enough, that they'll do whatever they have to do to give us the best chance from a tangible standpoint, in large part because they don't have the personalities around them we've had in the past; that kind of forces their hand in doing so.

Q. What are you expecting from Thomas Robinson this year? How much of an improvement are you looking to see?

COACH SELF: He's gotta have improvement very similar to what Cole had between his freshman and sophomore year. Cole goes from a guy that only played six or eight minutes a game to a guy that may have even made Second Team All-American or Third Team All-American the very next year. He needs to be an All-American for us.

I don't know about First Team or whatnot, but he needs to be a guy that's one of the best 10 to 15 players in the country, to be real candid with you.

Now, I think that he has ability to play at a high, high level like that. The thing about it is he's still very inexperienced. And the role that he's had offensively is just playing off of the twins.

So he was never doubled in the post. He was never this. He was never the focal point of the other team's defense. He had free run of the basket, rebounding. There were so many things he benefited from having those two around that now everybody's going to be designed to slow him down.

So it will be a different role for him. But I do think he's talented enough and he wants it bad enough and cares enough that he can kind of will himself to being one of the better players around.

Q. Could you talk a bit about Thomas's ability to step out now and take shots a bit more closer to the perimeter? We saw a little bit of that late night.

COACH SELF: That was late night. No, Thomas has improved his stroke. There's no question about that. But I haven't come up with a rule that we'll have for him. It was like Russell Robinson, we knew he was going to take two bad ones a game, two awful ones so he could take them in the first five minutes or whatever, but he was done after that.

And Thomas, I don't know what it's going to be, but he can't live on the perimeter. He's got to get to the free-throw line and become a better free-throw shooter for us than in the past. He'll be harder to guard than what he's been in the past because he stepped out make the shot.

Q. One more question about Thomas Robinson. Obviously there are great expectations for him this season. How has he been in terms of the offseason in terms of dealing with those expectations?

COACH SELF: He had not a good offseason. He had a fabulous one. And one reason why there's expectations for him is because he performed so well against some of the other better big guy in the country, different camps and all that.

And that's not -- that's not team ball, but from an individual improvement standpoint and going head to head with some guys, he fared quite well.

So I think his offseason has been great. I think the biggest thing in season will be, like I said, it's just him going from being a guy that was a complementary guy to being the guy that the defense are focused on stopping, and that's a totally different role if you've never been in it.

Q. Can you talk about Jeff Withey and what your expectations are for him this season?

COACH SELF: I think Jeff is a talented guy. He hasn't had a chance to play a lot. And if you go back and look at it, you know, in recent memory, Cole Aldrich was our fourth biggest guy, Thomas Robinson was our fourth big guy, Jeff Withey last year was our fourth big guy, and whether he can emerge to a comparable player as those guys remains to be seen. But I think from a talent standpoint he can.

He's just played behind some good guys, and he's trying hard. He's gotten stronger, although he can still become a lot stronger yet. But I like him. I like his talent level. His skill set's

good. He's not your prototypical big guy. He's a finesse big guy.

But still, yet, there's some really good shot blockers in our league, and Jeff would have to be considered to be one of them. If he plays enough minutes, he'll block a lot of shots.

Q. You've talked about -- you've talked about Kansas math, does that include subtraction this year you think with McLemore and Traylor? Do you think expectations will be unreasonable again this year?

COACH SELF: I don't know. You know, I don't think really expectations should change that much. We've got good players. We don't have the numbers that we've had in the past. There would be a lot of teams that like to start a team with Taylor at point and Robinson inside. I mean, that's not a bad way to start a team.

If you go back to '09, we had Collins at the point and you had Cole inside, and anchor and point and that ended up doing pretty good, and we didn't know Cole was good yet. He hadn't had a chance -- he hadn't done what Thomas has done so far.

So I think expectations can be tempered a little bit. But I don't think that we should allow us losing a couple of kids academically or on a ruling or the fact that we lost six really good players last year. We've still got good players.

Travis Releford, Elijah Johnson, those are good players, they just haven't had a chance to show it yet. Now we've been able to line up and play with some pros, and I don't know if we have the same number of pros on our team as what we've had in the past.

But we may coach them a little different in that we'll play through certain guys than we have, because in the past it's been equal opportunity. Open man, take the shot. This year we may want to make sure who the open man is.

But I'm excited about our team. I don't know, Kansas math, we have those six guys, twins, Selby, Morningstar, Reed and Little, and I think coaches' pick is third and don't have any of those Cats and now they pick us first.

So I'm not sure that intelligence level of guys that I coach against in our league when it comes to that stuff, but it is a unique deal, but I do think that our guys do expect to be pretty good.

Q. You're sure I'm aware of the fact that

there's uncertainty as to the future of the University of Missouri's program. I'm not going to ask you to make any predictions. Can you talk in general how important that rivalry between Kansas and Missouri is?

COACH SELF: Well, I think with basketball it's underrated because we're in the middle of America, but it's gotta be one of the best five to ten, at worst, rivalries in the country.

And one thing about, we don't like Missouri a lot. And I hear from other people they don't care for us that much. But it's one thing about rivalries, when you get in a situation like this, there is the hidden mutual respect that kind of comes out. And I think that does exist. And I would hate to lose that.

I really would. This league, I can't speak for everybody, but speaking from my vantage point, I'd love to have Missouri in it. Love it. But I also think this: It's not the same situation that it has been in months past or 18 months ago where the league is in jeopardy. I feel good about our league. I think our league is probably stronger today than it ever has been because you have key players in our league that seem to be on the same page more than they ever have been.

So it's not like Missouri's putting our league in jeopardy. I don't feel that at all. But it is something that I think we'd all agree to maintain what's been going on for 100 years, I think, is something that's pretty special.

I don't think you just get that by going to another league. I've been in leagues that moved around. I was at Tulsa and one year we're in the WAC and one year Missouri Valley and right after that they go to Conference USA and play different quadrants and you don't ever develop rivalries, never.

So it may sound good in theory, but having fans and having players circle games on your roster, on your schedule, as soon as the schedule comes out is important. And we've had some unbelievable games with Texas. I mean, epic games. The games that were probably as good as college basketball offered them in particular years.

And our rivalry with Texas, and I'm sure Rick would say the same thing, is going to keep getting better and more intense and more intense and more intense, but in large part because we're playing them twice.

You know, when our players, up until this year, when they look at the schedule, I mean we love playing Texas, and they probably like playing us. But they probably circle A&M, and we circle

Missouri or K-State. It's going to be totally different for them if they do go, and it will be different for us in some regards, but we'll still have -- we're going to develop greater rivalries as we move forward because we're playing everybody twice, and so it will be interesting.

But I'm excited, I really am I'm excited about our league. The last -- 18 months ago we're hoping we have one. A month ago we're hoping we have one. Now I think that not only do we have one, I think it's going to be stronger and better than ever.

But the appearance of instability or uncertainty creates talk. And I don't think that a lot of that talk is unfounded. I think which is fine.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you.

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