

PAC-12 Men's Basketball Media Day

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Ernie Kent

Washington State Cougars



Q. Coach, I wanted to ask you about the three-point shooting last year. You guys set a Pac-12 record, and you had taken considerably more threes than you had in previous years. At what point did you realize that was going to be the way to have the most success for you guys as a team? Is that the plan moving forward? You still have great three-pointers on your team.

ERNIE KENT: Early on, we saw we're going to be an excellent shooting team. It's such a weapon. The line is so close. There's so much talk about moving it back further and everything. Eventually, it may move in that direction. I even feel this year we've got more three-point shooters. We chart everything in practice. Any live situation, we chart it, and right now we've got seven guys shooting over 40 percent from the three. Not only do we have three great shooters coming back, three of the best in the conference, but in addition too, there's guys that can really shoot the ball. So, yes, it will continue to be part of our offense.

Q. Who are some of the other guys you expect to have big years from beyond the three-point line?

ERNIE KENT: Ahmed Ali will be one that can really shoot it for us. And Marvin Cannon and Aljaz Kunc will be able to do that. Jervae Robinson shoots the ball really well. We have my Slovenian kid, Jaz, who's just a phenomenal basketball player. I think people will enjoy seeing him this year.

Q. You attempted 905 threes last year, about 29 per game. Do you think that will be topped this year?

ERNIE KENT: I don't think you go in to shoot any particular number. They've got a green light to shoot it. As long as they get in the gym and put their time in. When it leaves their hand, I think it's going in and they think it's going in, then I'm okay with it. With the speed of the way we play the game and the way we spread the floor, it's such a weapon for us. The difference being with this group, we have an ability, I think, to really break you down off the dribble that's going to create a lot of rotations for defenses. So therefore, giving you more great looks from the three.

Q. What do you think the kind of green light you give your players does for their, I guess, confidence level?

ERNIE KENT: I think in this day and age with young people, confidence is a big thing. I don't ever want a player that I have to coach that has to spend time looking over at the bench at me after he's taken a shot or made a mistake. You want him to have the freedom to play and play this game. We spend a lot of time on dos and don'ts in practice, but when it's game time, I turn the game over to them. I think our guys have a tremendous feel of what's a good shot and what's a bad shot, particularly those three guys we mentioned, and when you give them an opportunity to shoot the three like that, they have a lot of confidence.

Q. A curious question about, you've been around a long time in college basketball. Is there any rules that maybe have changed as far as tweaked or anything that could help improve the game at this point?

ERNIE KENT: I think, again, when people start looking at the uniformity of international basketball and NBA in our game, our game is pretty good, the way it is right now. But I'm leaning more towards does it make sense to extend that three-point line, widen the key, doing some of the things they've talked about. I think with the players being more perimeter-oriented, you don't have that dominant low post and the game is speeding up, it probably makes sense to widen the lane at the three-point line a little deeper for entertainment value.

Q. Is that about it then? It would be the only one probably?

ERNIE KENT: I'm sure there's others that are being talked about. Those are the only two I would be in favor of for sure.

Q. What about fouls? You think five fouls is a good rule?

ERNIE KENT: I feel like it is. The five fouls, it is. People talked about quarters versus halves and things like that. I think a lot of that stuff still needs to go through experimental stages just to see, but people shouldn't foul anyhow. The only guy I knew was a player like that was Coach Lav.

Q. Hacker.

ERNIE KENT: Hacker.

Q. What about maybe the toughest places to play in the Pac-12, do you think?

ERNIE KENT: As a whole, I think, as you look back through the years, obviously, Arizona's always been a tough place to play. I think Bobby's done a great job at Arizona State. Washington, particularly when we play, is always a tough place to play too. I think the conference as a whole has kind of gone up and down. In the old days, the Oregons were just packed, and Mack Court sat on top of you. The new arena is still a tough place to play with people sitting on top of you all the time. And Oregon State is one of those, when people are in there, is one of the toughest places in the country in terms of energy in the building.

Q. You guys were picked toward the bottom of the league. What do you expect for this year?

ERNIE KENT: I felt like coming out of this year with Malachi Flynn returning, that we were upper echelon. All of a sudden, he leaves our program. With what's come in our door, Robinson, Ahmed Ali, I am thoroughly impressed with this team. We will not miss a beat with this team. The JV guys we recruited are long. They have a length I've not had before, speed, quickness, things we can do defensively. Our two freshmen are good players, C.J. Elleby and Jaz. Those two kids understand how to play. We have a different element with our team that I'm happy for. Our competitive energy, our toughness, and just our speed is a lot better than I've had before.**

Q. Anybody surprise you? All of a sudden, you start practice, and you say, hey, this guy's better than --

ERNIE KENT: Ahmed Ali is just a jet. He can really score and knows the game.

Q. JC kid?

ERNIE KENT: Yeah, he understands. He came from a school out of Florida, but he knows how to play. You can let him play because he knows the game and everything. I've been really impressed with Isaiah Wade. We had a scrimmage yesterday that lasted 35 minutes or so. He had seven rebounds in the game. He's 6'6", undersized, but knows how to get the ball.

And probably my two newcomers. C.J. Elleby, my newcomer, and Jaz from Slovenia are both skilled, long. C.J. is 6'8", Jaz is 6'9", they put it on the floor. They can shoot it. We're just bigger and longer and take up more space, which we've not had a team like that before.

Q. Can you get momentum in the preseason?

ERNIE KENT: No question about it. When you have six new guys like that, there's momentum every day just to get through the scrimmage. And we have another one coming up. And all of a sudden, you've got a closed door scrimmage, and then you've got an

exhibition game. It just keeps building that way and you get to the preseason play and everything, hopefully, you've got them where you have them when success comes. I like that.

Q. Do you think this team is a little better than previously teams talent-wise?

ERNIE KENT: Oh, no question. Not just talent and the ability to score, but defensively we can do a lot with this group. You can put two 6'9" guys at the top of your zone, and that will disrupt a lot of people. I just think the freedom to do more is what I'm comfortable with.

Q. We've been hearing a lot about the freshman Elleby. What can you tell me about him, his recruiting process?

ERNIE KENT: His dad played at Cal, played for Mike, and I remember coaching against him, what a great player he was, tough, tough competitor. His son is just like him, extremely tough, understands the game, and really likes to compete. When you get freshmen to come in where you work so hard, which is a jolt to their system, and they still can come through that -- and I always call it, they thrive instead of survive through practice. He's thriving in practice. That's a good sign. But he can really score, and he knows how to play. He's going to help us immensely this year.

Q. What was his recruiting process like?

ERNIE KENT: When we went through the recruiting thing with him, the thing we did a good job of, having Ed Haskins on my staff, who coached at Garfield. Bennie Seltzer, who played at Washington State. We're not just coaches, we're mentors, and we did a good job of helping mom and dad understand we're going to develop him as a basketball player. That's the piece you get in that, and that's the mentoring that takes place. I thought that had a lot to do with his parents and making them feel comfortable coming to our program.

Q. Robert Franks already the most improved player, and now he says he wants to be player of the year. How can you help him get there?

ERNIE KENT: Give him the ball and let him shoot it any time he wants to. For a guy that's worked so hard to change his body -- and I was with him every step of the way from afar as he went and looked at the NBA teams, and every team did a really good job of reaching back to me. I knew somebody in all the front offices and things, and they talked about he's got an NBA body. He's got an NBA jump shot. He's right there. So he just needs to have a year where he just steps it up a little bit, and I feel totally comfortable he's going to do that, but he can really score. He makes the game a lot easier for us coming back knowing you've got a guy that can fill it up like that.

Q. What's different about Robert now that he's gone through that process of flirting with the NBA?

ERNIE KENT: Confidence. Confidence is the biggest thing. I think, when you go up to that level, first of all, you're probably shocked. You're shocked at what they tell you, what they put you through, how hard they work, and I remember him coming away thinking, whew, I had no idea. Then all of a sudden now you go to the next one, the next tryout, the next tryout, and all of a sudden his confidence comes, and all of a sudden you're competing, and you're competing against players already in those programs. So I think the confidence factor is huge for him right now.

Q. Do you like plan to tweak the offense at all? Obviously, you guys shot the ball well from three-point land, but getting it inside was where you guys struggled.

ERNIE KENT: I think the biggest thing that you'll notice about this offense is that there are more players that have the ability to create and have what I call see the play and make the play. It was not by default. That's not going inside. A lot of times that play was there and we didn't make the play. This group already has the ability to do it. I'm already noticed it. When you talk about a pick-and-roll play and the screens are being slipped and the ball is right there, right on the money, and we're scoring or we're giving it one more. You'll see more freedom -- more freedom of movement, more cutting, more passing, and just really more basketball plays being made.

Q. Hot start last season, and then big rough patch. What was the difference for the team when they were rolling, undefeated, and then when they slid?

ERNIE KENT: Chemistry, confidence, something to prove. And I felt like we had success so early last year that we instantly as a coach you see it coming, you try to prevent it. We came back to campus and relaxed, and it knocked us out of stride, and we probably had seven or eight games last year where there was a one or two-minute stretch in that game where something happened where we didn't respond to it well, and it cost us. And a lot of that has to do with keeping that momentum from that early season success and keeping our wits about ourselves that we let get away from us. Hopefully, lesson learned because those two great players in the back of the room, they're well aware of that, and they won't allow this team to get in that place this year.