

PAC-12 Men's Basketball Media Day

Tuesday, October 8 2019

Sean Miller

Arizona Wildcats



SEAN MILLER: Well, we're finally excited to tip off a brand new season. A lot of people have asked me questions about a year ago, and no different than previous seasons, we have a lot of new players. This year we happen to have eight new players, so regardless of what happened a year ago, very few of this year's team were a part of it. Of the new players, we have four freshmen, and then we have a really solid group of transfers, a couple that will be eligible immediately, and we're really looking forward to blending the entire group together.

Nico Mannion and Josh Green represent us here today in terms of the players that I brought. Both are freshmen. But we don't really look at them as freshmen. Those guys are really seasoned -- they're going to be a big part of what we do, and both are tremendous kids. Great kids come from great families, and we're excited to have them as a part of our program.

Q. Coach Boyle was talking about he was going to press a little more this season. So I was just curious, it seems that they were talking about pressing in general, and I mean, he was going to play more zone defense. Is that something that you've entertained at all?

SEAN MILLER: You know, no. I think the last two years, one of the things we're excited about is to improve and get our defense back. If you look at maybe where we once were, we had a lot of pride in our man-to-man defense, and usually the defensive teams are able to win on the road, get better as the year grows. You get into those tough games in February and March, you have to be able to do both, score and play defense.

But we're hard at work at our defense, but in terms of us changing a whole lot, I don't think we'll do that.

Q. And then Dylan Smith, what does he bring to your team? Because there's a lot of confusion it seems. I always feel like he's the glue guy for your team.

SEAN MILLER: Dylan is one of those rare players in college basketball that he's a senior, number one, but he's also contributed on a number of teams that he's been a part of. He's an older guy that works very hard.

I think he's one of our team's best perimeter defenders, along the lines of what you asked me a second ago about our defense, he's part of the solution, I believe, moving forward for us this season.

Q. And you talk about the fans a lot and their support. And I've seen it, too. Can you talk a little bit about how your fans are so wonderful.

SEAN MILLER: You know, the fans at Arizona, I mean, they've been a part of our program for decades, well before I ever showed up. Coach Olson in many ways created that love affair between the community and our basketball program, and it's continued. You know, when we're in challenging times, sometimes it's in a game where we're not playing well, especially at home, they become the loudest. As a lot of people in this room know, our fans travel, and our away games, especially on the road in the Pac-12, you can hear them, you can hear the pockets of them. Going to the Pac-12 tournament, especially not a year ago but two and three years ago, I mean, it looked like a home game.

No doubt, we're very fortunate. Whoever the coach is at Arizona, I happen to have that coach right now, I'm very fortunate to have fans like that that are not only passionate and love the Arizona Wildcats, but they're also incredibly loyal, and I think our players feel that. Nico and Josh coming from our state, they know that, and I think it's a big reason why people like that choose our program.

Q. You've been around the conference for a decade now, two of the last three years, five McDonald's All-Americans have come into the Pac-12. How have you seen the talent pool rise over the years in the conference?

SEAN MILLER: Well, if I go back a decade ago when I came to Arizona, when our staff was brand new, it's amazing to think about how many great players our conference has produced. I think the numbers in the NBA speak for themselves. A few years ago you had Markelle Fultz No. 1 pick, Lonzo Ball, Lauri Markkanen. You had three lottery picks all in their first year from three different programs, and we followed that up with obviously Deandre Ayton being the No. 1 pick two years ago. That's just a small sampling.

When I think of players in our conference, I think of Isaiah Thomas at Washington, who's gone on to have

an amazing NBA career. But when he was playing in college, boy, he was really tough to deal with. Klay Thompson, first couple of years when you played Washington State, he was on their team, and you look at what he's become.

No doubt about it, and then when it comes to our program, we're fortunate, a couple weeks ago, Andre Iguodala shared a lot of his time with our team behind the scenes in our locker room and talked to them about life after basketball. But you think about what Andre has become, an iconic NBA player playing here with the Golden State Warriors. No question I think Pac-12 when it comes to producing talent and welcoming talent, and this year, to your point, there's some incredible freshmen in our conference, and I think that bodes well for the season ahead.

Q. Speaking about your freshmen, Nico and Josh, what have you seen from them in practice thus far, and what are your expectations for them this year?

SEAN MILLER: I think the first thing you want from the most highly regarded incoming freshmen is that they're coachable, that they don't think they have all the answers, and they're not just at Arizona to reach their own individual goals, that they came here to be a part of a team and to compete for championships and win, and also that they recognize that they have things they need to do better and work at. That's why they came to college.

And hopefully that's one of the big reasons they picked our program, that they feel like they can grow and develop.

Josh and Nico and really Christian and Zeke because these are the four incoming freshmen, those four guys all have that same characteristic, that they're very coachable, and I think they're all very good teammates in their own right.

Q. Having Stanley and Rondae on the same Toronto Raptors team that just won the championship, how special is that that the duo is back together?

SEAN MILLER: Well, we're proud of Stanley. We're proud of Rondae. And you're right, they're with the world champion Toronto Raptors. I think both of them are at pivotal parts of their career, and I know they both have had very good off-seasons. We wish all of our NBA family luck. We have coaches like Steve Kerr right here in Golden State Warriors that's a part of our basketball program's family. There's a lot of them out there, and it's exciting to see all of them do well.

But yeah, the fact they're on the same team, it's ironic.

Q. I got to know Jordan Brown when he was being recruited and his family. I was wondering what you expect him to bring to the program.

SEAN MILLER: Jordan Brown, I'm glad you asked about him. The way I would explain Jordan Brown as a part of what we do, there's not a high school player that we can go out and recruit this year that could come to us and impact next year more than him. And the fact that he's with us every day, man, he has a quality that he plays hard on every possession, and when you play the game with great effort and you're talented, you can't help but improve. And Jordan is going to be a really important part of our future.

He's already helped us right now because you can imagine our front court just on a daily basis, they can really challenge each other. Having Jordan, who doesn't play in games but is able to practice hard, it's been something that's really helped all of our front-court players, and it helps Jordan, as well, because you have a battle of Ira Lee and Chase Jeter, Jordan Brown, Christian Koloko, Zeke Nnaji, Stone Gettings. Those guys play all against each other every day, and it's really made for an early competitive environment.

Q. You touched on Stone. As a graduate transfer coming in averaging like 14, 15 points a game at Cornell, what do you expect from him this year for you guys?

SEAN MILLER: Well, Stone Gettings is 6'9", but he's different than the rest of our front court, which I think is something. He is more offensive oriented away from the basket, and he's one of our team's best three-point shooters. He's very skilled. When you put a roster together, having players that maybe are both the same height but are versatile, different from each other, I think it makes you a much better team, and I think a team that can be more successful. We're counting on Stone, and he's off to a really good start. Believe it or not, he won our mile run, which we do every year, and Stone is 6'9", maybe 240, and he ran a 5:13 mile. I think that shows you kind of his mindset.

Q. Do you think the 20-game conference schedule next year is a good thing or a bad thing, and are there any other things that this conference needs to do to get back to where it was?

SEAN MILLER: Well, I think the 20-game schedule is part of the solution moving forward for our conference. What once was isn't today, and that's the obvious statement. We have other conferences that are already playing 20 games, and strength of schedule to get the most teams in postseason is a big, big thing. You know, it's very difficult to get the most teams we can into the NCAA Tournament when our overall strength of schedule isn't as strong as some other conferences, and obviously winning non-conference games is also

pivotal.

But by being able to play each other 20 games or more because of the tournament, as well, I think that's going to help all of us.

Q. And obviously it's a big problem, but any idea as to why the conference has fallen off? What's gone on there?

SEAN MILLER: You know, it's very cyclical. I'll use the Big Ten as an example. They may have had their greatest year ever a year ago. If you would have looked at them two years ago, I'm sure in the spring they were looking hard at what was the problem, because they had almost a down year, and it really stems from who you lose, who you recruit.

But I know in the decade that I've been here in this conference, this is as deep and as strong of a group of coaches as we've had, and I think that bodes well for our future.

Q. You mentioned the coaches. There's three new ones. Do you have a piece of advice you would like to share with them as they enter the Pac-12 fray?

SEAN MILLER: No, you know, those guys, the coaches that are new, they're all very familiar with where they're at. Mick Cronin, I've known because I was the head coach at Xavier when he was the head coach at Cincinnati, and even before that. Mark Fox, Kyle, those guys, they'll all do a very good job, and we're really thrilled to have them as part of our league.

Q. Your women's basketball team on campus, really cooking with gas now, WNIT champions. What was your takeaway from Adia Barnes' run, and what does that do as far as the partnership that you guys have with basketball in Tucson?

SEAN MILLER: Well, Di is doing a great job. She's a lot of fun and really knows what she's doing. If you followed their success late in the year, our community, our fans got behind their team and had a sellout crowd in the last game of the year, which was amazing. But she's recruiting very talented student-athletes, and I think the fact that she played at Arizona and is one of the all-time great players in our program's history really helps her and gives her a lot of credibility, and she knows the landscape. She knows the Pac-12, plus she was an assistant at Washington, as well.

I think her understanding of the Pac-12 and her own pedigree as a player at Arizona, it really gives her, I think, a dynamic presence. You feel that as you watch her run our program.

Q. Back to your team, 15 extra inches to play with at three-point distance. Does that affect what you

want to do offensively?

SEAN MILLER: I don't know how much it affects what we do, but the three-point line moving back to the international line is significant. I think it'll have a big change. I coached USA Basketball, and being a part of FIBA, that distance is definitely a separator. So I think for all of us, you don't really know a rule change until you go through a season, but I do think it'll have an effect.

Q. 16 years now as a head coach; one of the things that we always talk about with players is what are you working on to get better, how are you getting better, and it's easy for them to kind of -- the tangible evidence. As a coach, how do you improve your coaching philosophy? Do you read books? I'm curious to know what you do to get better.

SEAN MILLER: No, that's a great question. What do I do to get better? A lot of different things, but you're right, learning the off the court things, leadership, how to build a culture, how to deal with in today's world maybe your best players being your youngest players. I think that's very different at every level, even the NBA, and again, how things used to be done, it's hard to sometimes compare because it's a completely different model.

But I would say the one thing about the Pac-12 is we have a variety of really strong zone defenses. You play Oregon, you're facing kind of a press that can be more aggressive or sometimes in place to slow you down and let the shot clock work against you, and they get into a match-up zone, almost like a switching man-to-man. I think UCLA with Mick will have kind of their own version of that, maybe even more aggressive, more pressure oriented. You play against Mike Hopkins at Washington, you're playing against the Syracuse zone, which he knows well. And Wayne Tinkle plays zone, Utah plays a match-up zone.

When you coach in a conference like that, you can sometimes go as much as two weeks without seeing a possession of man-to-man, but yet in our program that's what we do. There's an adjustment. I look back at how we've practiced, so I think adjusting to that, having our players the most comfortable we can be, the most prepared.

And the other thing is zone offenses are different against a match-up zone and a 2-3 zone. We're working hard at it. You throw in the fact we have eight new players, the two guys that are with us now, Josh and Nico, trust me, they've never seen any zones like the zones they're going to see. So how do you go about preparing them? It's not right before the game. You start that in the summer, and you move forward.

I think with all that we do, we have more of that mindset of preparing for zone defenses and maybe being more comfortable at an earlier period of time, both with our own team and our players. I would say that's one thing that we really looked at in the off-season for sure.

Q. What do you make of the new coaches that have come into the conference and what do you think they'll add to the league?

SEAN MILLER: Well, I think each of them is very prepared. They've had success at other stops. You look at Mark Fox, for example, he's been in the SEC for a decade. He's seen a lot of things and had some really good success and teams. The one that I know the most is Mick because he was at Cincinnati when I was at Xavier, and those teams at Cincinnati play the game with great effort. They have a defensive presence. They do it definitely differently in that they play a match-up zone for most of the game.

You know, Kyle, I think what he's done at San Francisco speaks for itself. I really enjoyed watching his teams play and tried to watch them whenever I could, both on offense and defense. I think we have three really good coaches entering our conference, and they join a group that's been in this conference for a while and have done good things. Might be the strongest overall group that we've had since I've been here.