

Pac-12 Men's Basketball Media Day

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Dana Altman

Oregon Ducks



DANA ALTMAN: We have a lot of work to do. We have a lot of new players. I think they're talented and are a good group. But we've got a lot of new faces to try to blend together and try to get to work together. So we've got one month from tonight, I guess, and we'll be opening up. A lot of work to do in the next month, but I do like our talent level, and hopefully we can put a ball team together.

Q. I was wondering, you've been around the conference for a while, and you've bought in some really good recruiting classes. But this year it seems like the recruiting has even gone up overall across the conference. How have you seen the influx of talent come in over the years?

DANA ALTMAN: The talent level for the league I think is really good. There are a lot of schools that had really good recruiting years. There's always a sleeper or two in the bunch that everybody doesn't anticipate becoming a really good player. We had Dillon Brooks a few years back that turned into a really good one.

You know, it's not an exact science, recruiting, and with players coming and going, one-and-dones, it's kind of hard to figure who could make the impact for the one or two years that they may be there as opposed to a player that hangs around for three or four years, Payton being a great example of that. He was a high recruit, but he stayed with us. He's going to leave as the all-time winningest player in Oregon basketball history.

Again, recruiting is not an exact science, but I do like the players that I see coming into the league. We recruited a lot of them that we didn't get. You get told no a lot more than you get told yes. A lot of really talented players coming into the league this year, and hopefully everybody will be able to make the adjustment quickly.

November and December have seemed to have taken on much more importance in the last few years with the selection committee, how your team does in November and December, and I think the pendulum has swung too far the other way. It used to be the last 10 games, and how you're doing, now it's November and December. But it will be a very important non-conference for all of us.

Q. What's it like to see Payton develop, not only going to be the winningest player, could be the assists and steals record holder, as well?

DANA ALTMAN: To watch Payton grow over four years, he was our point guard on our Final Four team, and last year really exploded to take us to the Sweet 16. He's a talented young man that's driven. He works very hard at his game. You love players like that. You love players in your program like that, where it's all about the team winning. He wants to play well. He wants to do well for himself, but the most important thing is winning ballgames and leading his team. He probably tried to do too much for a period last year, and he struggled a little bit, but really bounced back and played his tail off down the stretch.

Q. You've mentioned the scheduling being announced today, that you guys are going to be in Vegas against the Big 12 --

DANA ALTMAN: I think it's great. I think going to Vegas, first of all, and playing where we play our conference tournament is always a positive. You know, I know we're going to play a good opponent. They haven't quite signed yet, but we've got a pretty good idea who it's going to be, so we're pretty excited about it. And then going down to Dallas and playing the following year is something we're excited about.

I think it's great. I think our conference and Oak View and MGM and them sponsoring this, I think it's great for our league. I think -- I'm glad Jamie and the Pac-12 took the initiative and really jumped on this. I know Tad and Mike and I are all excited that first year to get things kicked off.

Q. You always talk about the importance of defending and rebounding, and your teams seem to get better as the guys buy in. How is it going early on this year?

DANA ALTMAN: Well, I'm hoping that the three guys that returned from last year's ballclub will tell the guys, you know, we need to start right away, our communication defensively and the effort that goes into it. Everybody wants to score, and their families, their girlfriend, everybody claps, and they do like that. And I understand that. It's human nature.

But you know, defense and rebounding, you look over

the course of the year and you look at the last two teams last year, Texas Tech and Virginia, I think they both -- their analytics, they were top ten, top 5 defensive teams. So defense does win you -- Villanova has won a couple, and they're defensively always very good. Jay does a great job.

You look at the teams that have taken it all the way, and their defensive production has been pretty good. The year that we went to the Final Four defensively we were very good.

You know, I think over the course of time, it's proven that if you're going to make a long run throughout the season, throughout the tournament, your defense better be pretty solid because you're not going to shoot it well every night.

Q. Do you have an Elgin Cook, junkyard dog type guy?

DANA ALTMAN: You know, those guys are hard to find. We miss Elgin something terrible. He was very good for us. I think we have a number of guys, Francis is physical, Shakur, grad transfer from Vegas, is physical. CJ Walker is aggressive for a freshman. I think our other freshmen are starting to get a feel for the physicality of college ball, and I think they'll make the adjustment.

But I do like our guys. I like their length. We're just not physical enough right now on the boards or the defensive end. Our idea of being defensively physical right now is just grabbing and holding. We've got a lot of work to do there.

But again, the next month is going to be critical for us because of our early schedule is so difficult, so we're going to have a lot of work here in the next month.

Q. It seems like your summertime recruiting may have pushed you over the top, being picked to finish No. 1. What do you think of that?

DANA ALTMAN: Well, I like the guys. I think the two grad transfers are really going to be important for us. I think it still goes back, though, to the guys we signed early, CJ Walker and Chris Duarte, those guys, Chandler Lawson, are all going to have to be a big part of our team. The three guys we got returning are really going to have to lead us through the early part of the season, Payton, Will and Francis. You know, and then hopefully the freshmen will come along.

Again, the adjustment to Division I basketball, you don't know how quickly they're going to make that adjustment, how quickly they're going to feel comfortable playing with their new teammates and in front of big crowds. Again, Fresno, Boise, Memphis, Houston and Seton Hall are five of our first six games.

So they're going to have to make the adjustment very quickly.

Q. You say recruiting is not an exact science, but you seem to have the exact formula on how to get it done. Every year, I don't care who you lose, you lose Bol Bol last year, and me personally, I think you're done, but you go on a great run, you mentioned Elgin Cook, Dillon Brooks. I don't care who you lose, you always seem to find a way to get it done the following season. How do you do it? I know you've got a pipe line up there, but how do you get it done?

DANA ALTMAN: Well, we've got a great staff. Tony has been with me for 10 years, starting our tenth year together, tenth season together. Josh Jamieson has been with me for 10, Kevin has been with me at Creighton. So we've got a real experienced staff. Mike Mennenga fifth or sixth year. So that continuity in the staff helps because they all believe in what we're doing.

But it goes back to players, and those guys recruit their tails off and we get good players. We've got good guys. They could have quit on it us last year. We were struggling, I mean, ups and downs, and Louis doesn't play the first nine games because of his knee, then we lose Bol right when we get him back, Kenny broke his jaw and was out a month and we get him back, and Paul sprains his ankle and he's done. We're 15-12 and we're not playing very well, and they could have given up on our coaching staff, they could have given up on each other, but I thought they showed tremendous character in continuing to grind. It's a long season. I keep telling them, all we've got to do, confidence is right around the corner. You've got to have one good one, and it'll bounce right back. They picked it up, and man, it was a great run. We had a couple bad offensive possessions against Virginia, or we would have had a shot there down the stretch. We were leading with four minutes to go, and just two really bad possessions and didn't give ourselves a chance.

But they're a good group of guys, and I think we've got a good group this year. I think they're really talented. I think they're good guys. I think they'll be fun to work with. Again, it's a marathon. You know, you start October 1 and you're going hopefully until April 1. That's six full months. You've got to have good guys, guys that want to be there and want to play together, and we've been really fortunate at Oregon to recruit really good guys that will stay with it.

Q. What's Dante's status?

DANA ALTMAN: Well, we're still going through admissions with him.

Q. Is it possible if it didn't work out you might get him after the fall semester?

DANA ALTMAN: You know, I'm not really sure what his situation is, and we'll get it worked out here this week.

Q. You talked a little bit about your assistant coaches and the longevity of your crew being together and recruiting. But I watched in game and I was quite impressed with how you're a pretty well-oiled machine there with your assistant coaches. Can you talk about the roles each one of them plays?

DANA ALTMAN: Well, I think that is important. The guys have been with me, and Tony is a tremendous defensive coach. He really gets after our guys and gets them to play hard. He's got great rapport with our guys. So I think he gives us something defensively that really gets our guys going.

Kevin and I have done a lot of the same things offensively over the years because we were together at Creighton and here, so that's helped.

And Mike is really good at player development and working with guys. I think they all have their roles. They all work their tails off, which is a big part of it, and the other part, I think the players trust them. They've been around a long time. They're all experienced. They've been at Oregon a long time. So if the guys are with us, there's just a trust factor that goes in there.

But it's a great group, and like I said, I'm very fortunate that Tony has stayed with us and Mike and everybody. It's a good group. Josh has been there for a long time, Jamieson, and keeps us all moving in the right direction.

Q. How hard is it -- it seems preseason has -- 100 years ago was shorter, and you've dealt with the transfers and the one-and-dones or guys leaving for whatever reason early. Compared to -- you had great success obviously when you had a little bit of continuity. How different is the preseason with a team like this when there's so many new faces as opposed to when you've got some significant carryover?

DANA ALTMAN: You know, the preseason is much different. You know, we had experienced teams there for a couple years and had great runs. You know, and offensively our efficiency numbers were really good because of that carryover. And then the last two years, we've tried to blend in so many new players, and I think that we've tried to do too much offensively, and we lost a little of our aggressiveness.

So this year we're trying to keep it a little simpler offensively and let them attack more and be a little bit

more aggressive, and I think I learned my lesson the last two years. You've got to be careful about giving them too much and having them think too much and not attack and be aggressively offensively.

Defensively I think we want to do the same things, but I think the difference between this ballclub and some of the last two years compared to the experienced teams that went a long way for us, you know, you've just got to be careful about letting them play, over-coaching them, giving them too much, and having them thinking too much rather than just going out and attacking and being aggressive.

Q. Was that part of the deal last year where you really seemed to hit your stride but not until February, and could this have the same --

DANA ALTMAN: You know, it's part of it, part of it. The last two years our offensive numbers, offensive efficiency haven't been good, and I think a lot of that's on me because I did give them too much and didn't let them attack or didn't get them to be aggressive offensively, give them that freedom. Last year so much of it was injuries because we geared so much the first nine games to Bol. He was getting 21-10, and then we had to kind of turn directions there, and that didn't help us any.

But I do think we've tried to look at what we didn't do well the last couple years, and watching the film, I just don't think we were aggressive enough. We've got to change that by letting them play, take a few bad shots and be aggressive and not get carried away with themselves, but we've got to be more aggressive in the open court. We need to be more aggressive in the half court. And I think freeing them up and not giving them nearly as many sets but trying to do the ones we put in much better.

Q. For Francis and Will, what's going to be the next challenge for them?

DANA ALTMAN: Well, Francis and Will early, they've got to communicate with guys. They know our system, what we're trying to do defensively. They know where our shortcomings were last year when we weren't playing well, so I'm hoping they'll pass that knowledge on to the rest of the guys, how much better we have to communicate earlier defensively and play together offensively much better than what we did. I'm hoping that their experience down the stretch gave them some insight on how we want to play throughout the season and what we need to do defensively and how important, depending on each other, communicating with each other, how important that is.