

# PAC-12 Men's Basketball Media Day

Tuesday, October 8 2019

## Kyle Smith

Washington State Cougars



KYLE SMITH: Just happy to be here. I'm excited to be in the Pac-12. New challenge, and have been really good -- the players that stayed in our program and the ones that we've added and got a really good group.

**Q. You've had success at places where success hasn't been frequent to places like Columbia and USF. What makes you think you can do the same thing at Washington State?**

KYLE SMITH: I think it's been done there before, and there's been guys that have -- going back to Coach Raveling, Coach Sampson, most recently the Bennett duo, and they did it in similar fashion to where you build a program, get -- and we chant all the time, having guys with great attitudes, great work ethic, guys that really want to be there. That's kind of been the key at other places we've been, although one is New York City, one is San Francisco and now Pullman. I don't know about the confidence, but we're going to stick with what we do.

**Q. A lot has been made of nerd ball, data raid. How would you describe it to someone who's just hearing that term?**

KYLE SMITH: You know, it's just -- it's our way of evaluating, getting our internal efficiency rating. So things that we value, what we do, and guys that do well if it, they're going to get their opportunities to compete and play. Kind of stolen from Texas high school football coaches, or it's really a football thing where they grade out every play. In essence that's kind of what we're doing with basketball and being very transparent with our guys and showing them what they have to do to get better and what they need to do to get on the floor.

**Q. How big was it for you to get CJ Elleby back after he went through the pre-draft process?**

KYLE SMITH: Great. People don't know this, and I didn't know what to expect, even though we recruited him a little bit at San Francisco. Better person. He's just really wonderfully attitude. He's all eyes and ears. He has the most to lose by having a coaching change, and for him to opt back in and embrace what we're doing is special.

**Q. What were those conversations like?**

KYLE SMITH: On the way back? We didn't have any

conversations really. I was like, hey, I'm your cheerleader. You figure out what you need to do, and I think about three days before he had to say whether he was in or out of the draft, I was like, hey, we're looking. I was more on the fence than I knew. I didn't know, I was just like -- we only had five guys retained or whatever so we were trying to sign nine guys or whatever, and it was like, oh, good that he's coming back.

**Q. Where would you like to see his game grow this year?**

KYLE SMITH: I think there is a group. We have to get better defensively to be competitive. I think we were 291 according to Ken Pom last year, which ironically last year three years ago in San Francisco was 291. If we can make the same kind of improvement, that would be helpful.

So I think getting our habits, defending, rebounder. CJ is a good rebounder, ball handling. He's a really good play-maker from all different -- you kind of play him as a point forward at times, and we'll put him in the middle of the floor in a lot of situations where he'll just kind of enhance -- he's gotten stronger, he's got incredible work ethic. He's been a joy.

**Q. Coming into a new situation, what adjustments do the players need to make to what you want to do, and what adjustments do you need to make because of the talent that you have?**

KYLE SMITH: You know, the adjustments for the players, I don't know, it's been -- it hasn't been much different than my other stops. I don't know if it's, hey, we're in Pac-12. It hasn't felt that way. And because it's basketball, really we're very fundamental. I always use the expression everything I needed to know I learned in high school, because of my high school coach. So whenever it gets a little off center, I take it back to that.

And then I think the adjustments I had to make was just building relationships with these guys. I think that's still the essence of coaching. We make a big deal about the data and that stuff, but it's really about building these relationships, and what I'm excited about Pullman is it's a great place to have culture. It's a great place to get to know your guys. We have space. I've coached at San Francisco, where it's hard to get a space to just get together. In New York even worse.

Having some outdoor space, some living area, and we're going to have a barbecue, it's great.

**Q. For those not familiar with what you do, what am I going to see out on the court?**

KYLE SMITH: You're going to see a gritty team. I won't say style of play. We have got to get where we defend, rebound, take care of the ball. Hopefully we'll be there. We've got to find ways to get stops, compete.

**Q. No trouble finding a restaurant last night to eat?**

KYLE SMITH: No, don't -- we've got Black Cypress in Pullman, which is phenomenal.

**Q. Larry Scott mentioned this morning just that they're working on a formula for a year from now where Pac-12 will go back to playing -- just missing two teams playing twice. So a 20-game schedule versus the current 18. How do you sort of envision that in terms of strength of conference and still getting the non-conference games that you want, and just missing an opponent -- two opponents -- I don't know?**

KYLE SMITH: I'm pushing for 22. Let's just make it easier.

**Q. It's tricky --**

KYLE SMITH: They went through all the A, B, C -- I'm like, look, let's just go 22. I think the idea behind it is to strengthen the conference. Really it's 20 high-major games or whatever, in whatever the tier A, tier B, whatever you're going to get more opportunities. I'd have to reengage -- top 50 games, just get more opportunities, and the better we do outside the conference -- if our league is able to win 75 percent of the games out of the conference, it's projected you'll get six teams in the NCAA, and that's kind of our goal is to try to beef up the conference, and we'll do our part the best we can.

**Q. A lot of these kids are being briefed today on this California law, and maybe Larry went over it with the coaches, as well. I know it's on the horizon, 2023, but I'm guessing you would still like to be in Pullman at that time, and it's hard to recruit to Pullman --**

KYLE SMITH: Bite your tongue. Pullman is great. Friendliest place on earth.

**Q. I went to school there. How do you see this potentially affecting recruiting and budgets and just the challenges --**

KYLE SMITH: I honestly don't -- I think it's a great opportunity. In theory it's great if the players can -- their likenesses, their images, but there's obviously going to be unintended consequences of -- probably put a better package together in Seattle with Amazon. I've

already mentioned Jess Ford. But I don't think it's going to impact Washington State that much. I think it's going to be six of one -- we'll do the best we can on that, but like I said, Silicon Valley has got some pretty nice things they could probably image, too.

**Q. Can you see the kid who's coming off the bench and giving you two minutes at the end who's from rural Wyoming and suddenly is this beloved player on campus who maybe gets a chance in his hometown to be on the Chevy dealership or -- it might not just be something for star players.**

KYLE SMITH: You know, you almost -- if you would have said "bountiful Utah" you would have described Jeff Pollard. I've already kind of prepped him for a mayoral candidacy when he's done. So he's been working on it. But no offense to Glenn, but I'm like, he's beloved there, so he would be --

**Q. And serving his last term.**

KYLE SMITH: Is he? Jeff? I mean, serious, but you guys know, he is -- I think all the athletes there, as long as Minshew doesn't move back to town, we've got a chance with Jeff.

But no, I can see that Jeff Pollard would be a great -- and for us being in Pullman, it's about being the student-athlete. It is. You can create culture and create teams. It's a very -- the community embraces you, and you give back, and I think that's why I really love the job thus far. I haven't lost yet. But they give back, man, and they will root for you if you embrace what they're about.

**Q. What's been your biggest challenge so far?**

KYLE SMITH: Getting in and out of Pullman. It's no secret. That's the challenge. You know, we figured out it was easier to go from Amsterdam to Seattle to Pullman is about as easy as going from Casper Community College in Wyoming. It took the same amount of hours. All right, we'll live in Europe. I heard we've got one more route from Seattle, 2020 it's Denver.

**Q. You talk about nine new guys. Your whole team is new, you did that at USF. How tough is it when you walk in and there's zero continuity and you're starting all over?**

KYLE SMITH: You know, this one seems like the easiest one so far, maybe because it's the third time I've done it. I always say Columbia we had -- Columbia admissions was close. I couldn't add anything, and they had -- Joe left me 23 players. I was like, what do I do with 23 of them, and there's no -- I had to create a JV program, so it was a whole different thing. And then San Francisco I had to get familiar with the league. We brought in a few extra guys, and this is the first time we've had them out-manned as far as -- five stayed in

-- at one point we were down to three and CJ was in the draft, and then two opted back in. We still had like 11, so it's like -- it feels like it's easier to get what we're trying to do with the basketball stuff, and again, I think it's the third time around.

Obviously it's a bigger challenge, but as far as getting the basketball where it needs to go, right now it feels like we're a move ahead of those things. I've got more allies in the locker room instead of having to -- and I always have great respect for the guys that stay in the program because it's a little harder to teach an old dog, new tricks. If you've got a blank slate it's a little easier.

But it's been great so far.

**Q. Any real surprises hitting you guys coming in, like maybe they're a little bit better than I thought they were?**

KYLE SMITH: It's funny, I think with our system, we're individual workouts and we'll play open gym and certain guys you think are doing really well, and then we get to really stripping them down, and a little premature. But I do think -- like I said, I'm scared to say it now because a month from now it could be different, but I do think Guy Williams' son has got a chance to be down the road a good player, but he's just got...

The new one, we've got a big 7'2" kid from the Ukraine. Probably take some time but he's got good hands and he's big and no one plays with those guys anymore. As he gets older --

**Q. Would you redshirt him?**

KYLE SMITH: You know, I don't know. I mean, I'd like to redshirt them all to be honest with you. I've got a six-year deal, so it's like, redshirt them this year, because getting old and competing in this -- I think unless there's two paths to go in college basketball, it's get old, get stale, or get one-and-dones, and what to do at Washington State is pretty apparent.

**Q. It's always been a decent model to keep guys in redshirt and then the fourth year you can compete --**

KYLE SMITH: You know, exactly, and it's a little trickier, I think, with the Power Five conference, the recruiting, like there's expectations. So we've been kind of -- that's why I like international guys. They're not really coming here to redshirt. That would be the biggest catch. But if you can explain it to them, there's going to be -- we don't know yet, but there will probably be a couple guys that it will be in their best interest. I want guys that want to stay there. That's really vital. Any job -- we've got to be invested in our guys and they've got to hang in there and do well. I recruited a guy who wasn't getting a lot of attention, I won't name who it is, I bear down and

said, what would Tony do? What would Tony do? I was like, I think you'd take him because you could coach him. And going back when Dick and Tony were there, that's how I got to know those guys, because we were recruiting the same guys when I was at St. Mary's, and he had to be like -- he wasn't worried about who was recruiting who, and he was like, what fit? And he still does it at Virginia. It's amazing. He's taking like Clark was coming to UC Davis, he's starting the National Championship game. It is crazy. So you've got to be --

**Q. You talked about grittiness, that your team needs to have that grittiness to be successful. Most coaches want a tough and gritty team. Can you coach toughness or is it something you recruit? Are there things that you can work on with your guys to help them understand that this is how we have to win, we've got to be tougher, here's how to do it?**

KYLE SMITH: I hope you can coach it. There's a certain range. Obviously you've got to value it. I don't think it's valued when you're recruiting, like this guy is tough. You're like, no, I like the guy that jumps and runs fast. But actually their hustle stats that no one talks about. Really it's a grit chart. It really is. It's just basically getting guys to do -- actually before I left down here, we put dental floss in all their lockers.

**Q. What does that mean?**

KYLE SMITH: Do you not every day?

**Q. I do. Absolutely I do.**

KYLE SMITH: Do you?

**Q. Absolutely. I miss a lot.**

KYLE SMITH: Hang on, hang on. Well, only one guy on my team flosses every day, and it's Jeff Pollard. But it's the thing you have to do that you don't want to do, and that's what we put value on that stuff, whether it's a loose ball, a charge. Everyone does it, but we're really -- we're basically negotiating for playing time on who's doing those things.

**Q. Everybody has got to buy in --**

KYLE SMITH: Yeah, or else you don't get to play. I've got to have the guts to do that. That's the part, because there's going to be push-back from some guys, and every program every year because there's always one guy that's better than you thought and there's always one guy who uh-oh we were counting on him and he's struggling. That's why I don't mind sharing it because it's tough. I've been doing it 20 years and it's still a challenge to certain guys.

**Q. With regards to scheduling, I know you did an excellent job here last year in San Francisco, now you're tooling a new team together. I see a lot of**

**buy-in games with the exception of the Caymans tournament. Is that more done by design, so you can get a feel for what this team is like so you can get a feel for the conference season?**

KYLE SMITH: You're going to hate my answer. I had zero input on the schedule. It was done. It was like, oh, that's done? Thank God. We're trying to sign players so it didn't -- moving forward we'll -- it was like, hey, that's done? Thank you. Thank you, previous staff.

So it takes time and energy to do that, and moving forward we'll be pretty strategic, like trying to put together -- it makes sense. Like I said, it's a change for me. I'm used to having two or three high-major games. I've got 20. So it's plenty. It's plenty.