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An interview with:



THE MODERATOR: We'll begin the afternoon session for press conferences. Joined now by Washington State student-athletes. We'll take questions for the student-athletes.

Q. When it comes to the peripherals of this tournament, the travel, the sight-seeing, where do you see you making the biggest adjustment from being in Sacramento a year ago and having experienced that?

KYLE WEAVER: The biggest adjustment? I don't really know. I think it's very similar to Sacramento, you know, just having a chance to be here, you know, the practices, talking to you guys, being able to go out and shoot around on the court, I think just all those things, that experience, you know, I think is just, you know, something that we'll never forget.

I don't think it's really different, you know, from Sacramento. But just the small things that we do while we're here, you know, I think are the most memorable things.

DERRICK LOW: Like differences as like with our team experience or just like differences between Sacramento and Denver?

Q. You have been through it before last year, now you kind of know what to expect.

DERRICK LOW: Yeah, I mean, just a little bit. Of course, yeah, we've done it before. I mean, last year was Sacramento obviously. But this is a whole different tournament. You know, anything can happen, whether or not you have experience or not.

Just hopefully we can do good. Hopefully we can get adjusted quick to the altitude over here. But other than that, I think it should be fine.

Q. After watching tape and practicing on Winthrop, can you talk about what they do that impresses you?

KYLE WEAVER: Their guards can score. Back-court is real good. They like to get out and run in transition. And, you know, that's something that we've been working on in practice, to get back and try to slow them down and make them play over us.

Q. Do you have any memories or stories of being the hunted, when you realize that a team really respected you or its fans really respected you? What was it like kind of encountering that new status as the hunted?

DERRICK LOW: Yeah, this year has been a lot different. Like you said, you know, all the years before this year, we've always been, you know, the hunters. We've kind of been the underdogs, the team that no one would expect anything from. We would just come up and surprise a lot of people.

But, you know, with the success we had last season, you know, things started to change for us. Now the roles are switched. Instead of being the hunters, we're the hunted. It just brings out the best in every team every night we play they want to go after us. That's part of the game.

It's been a fun thing. I mean, I thought we adjusted well to that new role. We had some ups and downs throughout this year. We lost three at

home. I looked at the good side of that and saw us bouncing back against USC after that. So it was good.

Q. Is it good to be out of the PAC-10 now and be facing someone new? Does this Winthrop team remind you of anyone you saw in the PAC-10 or anywhere else?

KYLE WEAVER: Yeah, it is good, you know, to get out of the conference and have a fresh start, so to say, to play a team you haven't seen before, don't know much about. That element of surprise can surprise you sometimes in a bad way (smiling).

But, you know, playing a different team, you know, it's always good for us to be able to go out and try to adjust our game.

I think Winthrop, similar to Oregon, I would have to say if I had to compare them to a team, from what I've seen on tape and from what we know about them, they play a smaller lineup, they like to get up and down the transition, and their guards can fill it up. I'd have to say Oregon.

Q. You're not going to be here next year, but they're moving the three-point line back. What is your thought on that? Do you think it's become too easy?

DERRICK LOW: No, I don't know. I guess I don't really have much of a thought on that. You know, just certain defenses extends a lot further than the three-point line. And sometimes I just shoot it from far away. I mean, other than that, I guess that's okay.

I don't know if it's considered that easy. I mean, I guess some people have a lot more range than others, but...

Q. The Selection Sunday announcement came at 3:00 or so. Can you give me a little bit of a time frame on how long it took you guys to recognize anybody on Winthrop by name? Was it Sunday night, Monday morning? How long did the learning process take in terms of identifying guys by name?

KYLE WEAVER: It was pretty quick, a few minutes. I'm pretty sure me and Derrick, we didn't know much about Winthrop as a team. As soon as we talked to the media, we were hearing names, Do you know such and such? Have you ever seen this Jenkins guys? We knew the names pretty quick not seeing them. It's always difficult to tell

and try to make adjustments or try to figure out what you want to do individually or as a team.

But, yeah, we heard about those guys pretty fast, so...

Q. These last few weeks you've had a lot of people showing up to your games, some old faces. Your high school coach is coming in, youth coach, best friend from elementary school. Have you done a lot of reflection in these last couple weeks and are you savoring this moment as your career winds down?

DERRICK LOW: Oh, yeah. I mean, it's always good to see all my friends and family like that. Yeah, I guess, you know, this year, they've just been making a lot more efforts to come in and watch me play in person a lot more, just because this is the last time. They're not going to get another chance to watch me, you know, play a home game, a senior night game, or an NCAA tournament game. So they're all coming to support, and I think that's fun.

Yeah, I mean, just seeing them, kind of just makes me reminisce about back when I was growing up, like you said, playing outside leagues, being coached under Ryan's dad, just being brought up playing intermediate basketball with Coach Dean and then varsity with Doc and stuff. Brings me back and makes me think of all the people who helped me out back then. Just makes me thankful for all them.

Q. Can you look back and talk about the culture shock living in Honolulu, moving to Pullman?

DERRICK LOW: Oh, yeah, why I know nothing about Pullman when I was getting recruited there. I just got a phone call from Coach Tony one day. I didn't know anything. After that phone call, I just felt real comfortable, just a good feeling about Coach Tony and his staff and about Pullman just because straight up he just told me right away, like, it's way different than Hawaii. I mean, of course, you don't got no beaches. The weather is not year-round nice like it is in Hawaii. There's not much to do. But, you know, you will have your school. You will have your basketball family. You will have basketball to play, so that should keep you occupied.

But as far as the culture shock, yeah, I mean, you got to endure through a tough winter. We don't got any of that back in Hawaii. It's pretty

much every day is beach weather.

As far as the food, it's a lot different. I miss home food a lot. A lot more local kind of foods that I miss. What else? Yeah, another thing that I really miss is like the diversity we have back in Hawaii. I'm used to being around, you know, a lot of Polynesians and a lot of Asians, just a lot of other different kind of people. It's just a lot different than it is back in Pullman, so...

KYLE WEAVER: It's diverse in Pullman, right (smiling)?

DERRICK LOW: Very diverse in Pullman (laughter).

Q. You mentioned earlier about the point of being the hunted this year. Can you tell me, having been through a season as the hunted, in what ways your game is better now than a year ago going into the tournament?

KYLE WEAVER: I think Derrick kind of touched on it before, you know, being the hunted. I think every night, especially this season, you know, we've gotten everybody's best shot on down from pre-season to the PAC-10 conference. I think everybody just came out, you know, and really wanted to beat us.

That forced us to, you know, raise our level of play and to compete at a higher level.

Q. Looking at the stats for your team and Winthrop, it appears that both of you rely on defense execution, that sort of thing. Have you looked at the film of Winthrop and maybe seen yourself a little bit? Are these teams similar in that regard?

KYLE WEAVER: Defensively, you mean?

Q. Yes.

KYLE WEAVER: Yeah, we haven't really seen -- we've seen bits and pieces. We haven't watched their defense yet. You know, if you have any film on that, you probably should let us know because it sounds like you know more than we do (laughter).

But from what I've heard, I actually heard the Winthrop coach talk watching ESPN. He was saying that defensively our styles are very similar. So I'm interested to see what they do defensively and see how we can be effective against it.

Q. What other schools were you primarily recruited by?

KYLE WEAVER: Go ahead, you take that one.

DERRICK LOW: I basically narrowed it down to Washington State, University of Hawaii, Utah and Gonzaga were like my final four.

KYLE WEAVER: I got my first offer from Bradley my junior year. A couple mid-majors. Illinois State, Western Illinois, some smaller schools like that. I even considered going to prep school before considering Washington State. So I didn't really get a whole lot of looks, but...

Q. Derrick, from where you were when this program started to where it is now, what was it like trying to be patient of where it is now?

DERRICK LOW: It was really tough. I mean, you know, when we first got there, we knew like the rebuilding process wasn't going to happen at a snap of the fingers. Coach Big Ben at the time, he kind of told us the rebuilding process basically takes about three years. I thought, you know, looking back at that, that was really true, what he said.

But, yeah, when we got there, we knew things weren't going to happen fast. But, you know, we suffered some hard times. One thing that jumps out in my mind is the Oklahoma State loss. It was like 82-29 or something. It was really embarrassing after that. We were like, Oh, no, what's happening? But like, you know, I think most guys would want to, you know, kind of go somewhere where they could have success right away. I thought it was real neat for us, you know, to stay together and, you know, tough it out. Eventually I knew something was going to happen. That's how, you know, the trust we had in the Bennetts. We just stuck together and we were really patient.

One of our guys left, you know, in between, Josh.

Akognon, but we're all behind him and excited for him. Other than that, we all stick together. We're patient. I think we got rewarded. Just trying to keep this rolling, just get this program turned around completely.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, guys. We'll have Coach Bennett up here in a few minutes.

Joined now by Washington State head

coach Tony Bennett. Questions for Coach Bennett.

Q. What is your thought on the three-point line moving back next year?

COACH BENNETT: I think, you know, it won't affect many guards. I think there's some kids, some of your fringe players, those guys that maybe sometimes it's the bigger guys that toe the line and shoot the three, you won't see them shoot it as much. Because a foot is noticeably different.

So I don't have a strong stance on it either way, to be honest. But I do think the guards or guys that can really shoot it and have range, no problem. But I think you'll see - and I just use the bigs - less of those guys shooting it. Whether it's in transition or not, that does make a difference. So you'll probably see a few less. Whether it's an advantage for a team that likes to pressure more or pack it in, we'll have to wait and see.

I played overseas some. As a shooter, that didn't bother me too much. The NBA line, that's another deal. But a foot for a shooter I don't think makes as big a difference.

Q. One of the reasons they're doing it, the NCAA said, is they think the midrange jumper has been taken out of the game. When you played, do you think the three-point shot was used differently than it is now?

COACH BENNETT: Well, in college, pretty similar. You know, I played -- '92 was my last year. We shot a lot of threes when I was at Green Bay. I think it's very similar.

The game has shifted a little more towards dribble penetration and the great athleticism. But I haven't checked the stats if more threes are shot or not. But I think, you know, you have to recruit to your system and your style. Shooting is very important to us. So we won't change too much how we do things.

But I do believe that the game has shifted a little bit, the more we talk about it, to a penetration game, spreading the floor. You know, you'll have to shoot. You're right, you'll have to be able to shoot the midrange shot a little more and do things like that.

Q. Which of Winthrop's guards impresses you most on film and what's the defensive strategy plan?

COACH BENNETT: They have great experience, as we do. We have a junior and two

seniors. They can really play. What Jenkins did in the tournament was impressive. He went on that run where he scored 33 points. He's very capable.

But their point guard is very quick as well. You know, McCullough is an interesting guy. They play him like a four, but he's almost a perimeter player. I think their experience, they've been in this setting more than our guys have. They can manufacture their own shots. You know, they have a nice feel. They'll push it in transition. When it's not there, they're disciplined enough to run their sets. Then they have a guy like Jenkins or their point guard who can create their own. That's very quick. I saw that.

So defensively, you know, we've played against some pretty good guards in our league. But we'll have to be ready. Any coach will tell you, when you play against good individual players, you have to make them earn their shots. You can't let 'em break you down and get easy ones.

So that will be the challenge for us against their guards and their other players, is that we're in the right spots and they're hitting tough, contested shots, if they're hitting them.

Q. How much did you know about Winthrop on Sunday when the selection was announced at 3:00?

COACH BENNETT: I know of their tremendous past. Four tournaments in a row. I think it's eight out of 10 that they've been in. They had a young man from New Zealand who played on their team last year, Craig Bradshaw, who I played overseas in New Zealand. We have an Australian and New Zealander on our team. So I always followed them. I was very impressed. I remember them playing real well in the tournaments every year they've been in it.

I didn't see them play a lot this year. I didn't see a lot of teams play a lot. But just very impressed with the tradition they've built. When I played at Wisconsin-Green Bay, I know how hard it is to build a dynasty or build competitive, successful seasons like they have. And they have done it. They've done it well. Also when I lived in Charlotte, North Carolina, I'm aware of obviously the school. We used to practice in the practice facility with the Hornets right down the road from their university. Have great respect for what Coach Peele has done being on their staff and then taking over. They haven't missed a beat.

Q. Having come from a mid-major program and you're trying to build a program at Washington State, knowing that Winthrop beat Notre Dame last year, is it easier for you to explain to your players that these guys are gonna be ready to play you tomorrow?

COACH BENNETT: Yeah, I hope every kid in this tournament understands the significance of that, whatever team you're on. There's parity in college basketball. That's been proven. One of our principles in our program, we talk a lot about, is humility. That to us means knowing who you are.

If we would make that mistake, that would be a shame at this stage of it. You certainly have to respect every opponent you play. But with their past success, and a lot of those kids returning, you're gonna have to be ready. That's been the case for us all year, whoever we've played, out of conference or in conference.

So certainly I hope our kids understand that. If they don't, it will be over quick. I understand that.

Q. In what ways was this season more challenging for you and your team after the success you had last year?

COACH BENNETT: Yeah, I just did a radio interview. I think a good way to put it is last year whenever we won a game, people would say, How did that happen? And this year whenever we lost a game, people would say, How did that happen? That's a big difference.

I think our league stepped up this year, the PAC-10. It was good last year, but I thought it was very good this year. And, you know, we were projected higher. Had to play with the bullseye on your back, so to speak. Had a stretch where we lost three games in a row at home in league play. So I had to deal with more expectations. Of course, expectations are what you put on yourself. But it just was a different year. The newness of that turnaround season wore off. You know, it was approaching it in a different way.

But I thought our kids hung in there and battled against some of the adversity, played against good competition, didn't lose sight of who they were as a ballclub.

But those are the challenges, the first thing I mentioned, I guess the expectations maybe more from the outside. Our kids understand how hard they have to scrap every time out. So I don't know how much it changed for them. But they really wanted to do well. The big thing was last year,

Let's try not to be - as we called it - a one-hit wonder. Let's not try to be one of those let's back it up. I think it's real important in establishing our program with following up last year's season with real quality this year. For the most part we have, and now the challenge is to try to do it again in this tournament.

Q. How hard is it to be patient when you take the program from where you were when you first got there to where it is now, where people are asking you when you lose, How did that happen?

COACH BENNETT: Yeah, I mean, it wasn't too hard. You try to get your program in a spot where there are those kind of expectations. So I always looked at that as a positive. Our kids were tough enough and experienced enough to spin out of those. That's the scary thing about our league every game. You're sitting there going, Do we have enough to get it done? You're always walking that fine line.

But you try to get your program at a spot where there are some expectations that your kids have and certainly the outside. That's a positive thing. Just from where it was, you know, that was okay. We just dealt with it. I think people would look at us and understand the challenges that were there. But there was never a problem. I think our kids, they wanted it so bad. They hung tough, just dealt with it.

Q. These two teams appear to play similar styles. Is this game tomorrow going to be who can impose their will on the other guy in a lot of respects?

COACH BENNETT: Yeah, I mean, every game you play is like that. You're gonna have to play solid. I know how good they are defensively. They really make people work. We do have similar systems.

And then, you know, they have real strong guards. I think they probably run more sets than we do, a little more motion-oriented. Certainly who can get to their game first, even though they're similar games and execute. That's the beauty of this tournament, whether you're from a major conference or a mid-major conference. It's going to be a dogfight and we understand that.

Q. The western side of Colorado is not a hotbed for recruiting. You pulled two kids

out of there. What did you think when you got those two?

COACH BENNETT: One from Pagosa Springs. The big metropolis. We found a place smaller than Pullman, Washington. And Grand Junction. Just kids that -- you know, this class, the kids that are juniors and seniors, were not recruited by a lot of high major schools. Maybe one or two of them were. We just wanted kids that fit into our system, that bought in, excited about coming to Washington State, help us turn this around.

I remember my father saying, You can't -- there's no quick fix to this. You have to do it with character. If you think there's a quick fix to building a program in the league like the PAC-10 or anywhere, you're kidding yourself. Start with character and don't make a mistake on that. That was our first intention: kids that were tough, that wanted to come here, were excited about it, full of character. Daven Harmeling and Caleb Forrest are at the top of the list when it comes to that and genuinely excited to placement they'll do whatever you ask of them. That's a joy to coach. They don't question you. It's, Whatever you want, coach, I'll do it.

Q. Of all the places your dad chose to go to out of retirement, why did he pick a place with so little tradition? What about Washington State and Pullman did you see that you could find some future in?

COACH BENNETT: Well, it was his decision. I knew nothing about Pullman. I'll have to tell him.

I think it was about three years he had been out. Jim Sterk did a great job of luring him in. First of all he said, Take it a year at a time. We want you three to five, but each year, take it a year at a time. If it's going the right direction, your son will have a great shot to take over. I think that was one of the things that drew him to Pullman.

The other thing is he loved coaching in a major conference. That was a desire of his. And maybe even more importantly, going to a place where people doubted if it could be done. Kind of testing his system and saying, You know, I want to take a place that hasn't had success for a while and do it the way that I believe is the right way for us and see if it can happen.

That really appealed to him. You know, Pullman, like you said, small college town, family atmosphere. What the athletic department's based on, the character, that fits him well. Like I said,

when he told me he was coming out, it shocked me. I thought he was done. He said, I'm going to come out, go to Washington State. I had to look on the map, see where it was, go from there. I think those were the things that really pulled him out of retirement.

Q. Going back to how you found these guys, I asked Derrick, he's had a lot of old faces show up, have you had a chance to reflect on what this senior group means? I remember you flew out to Honolulu for a few hours to watch Derrick play. Have you done reflecting on the senior group, what they meant to the program?

COACH BENNETT: Certainly I have. Until our season's done, that's probably when it will sink in. Their story, it's remarkable. Maybe even different than a group that comes in, is on top, stays on top. When you come in, get knocked around like that group has, we all did for a couple years, then see a turn like Derrick, Robbie, Kyle has, the other guys, I think it's that much sweeter.

I think they'll be able to sit back and be very satisfied in their career, very thankful for what took place. We sold to Derrick a little bit what Jason Gesser did from Hawaii. Come, in a sense, and be a Jason Gesser. That was the quarterback of the football team that helped them get to the Rose Bowl. Derrick obviously verbaled without seeing the place. Special kid.

What they've done for this program, they will be embraced and remembered for a long time in the Cougar basketball nation, for sure. And because of the character issue, it makes it that much better. They represent what a student-athlete I believe is all about.

I'm sure there are some great stories. I think they'll look back very fondly on what happened.

THE MODERATOR: Coach, thanks very much.

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