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An interview with:



THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead with questions for the student-athletes.

Q. Taylor, you're from Oregon, do you feel like you're back in your part of the country? I don't know enough about the politics of Washington and Oregon to know if you feel at home or not, but do you?

TAYLOR BRAUN: I'm a good 400 miles from home. So, there's some distance. But, I'll have a good amount of family members making the trip because it's easier to get to Spokane than Fargo. So, it's nice being back in the Northwest, but I'm still far from home.

Q. Taylor, a lot of family and friends, what are you expecting?

TAYLOR BRAUN: Yeah, I have some classmates making the trip, a bunch of family, I'm thinking like around 30 people or so.

Q. For the other three, is this your Frisco? The football thing got on the bandwagon with the Frisco, do you feel like you're doing your part with the basketball?

MARSHALL BJORKLUND: Yeah, obviously this is the biggest tournament that everyone in the NCAA is trying to get to in the basketball and so it's kind of hard to compare to the Frisco with the football team, but obviously it's a pretty big accomplishment.

TRAYVONN WRIGHT: I say, yeah. It's our main goal for the year, is to get in here and try to win a couple games here. So, yeah.

LAWRENCE ALEXANDER: I say yeah too. Like Marshall said, it's not the same thing, but at the same time it's our goal to get to the tournament and hopefully win a couple games.

Q. For Marshall and TrayVonn, Taylor's mentioned wanting to be a team that just doesn't get here and is one and done. What do you guys mentally or how are you prepared to go into this tournament trying to win more than just a game?

MARSHALL BJORKLUND: To be honest with you we're not really preparing any other way than we have all season. We have played high major teams in the past. We have been here for quite a few years. So, as far as preparation, we're just -- we know they're going to be a little bit longer, maybe a little more athletic, but we're going to play our game. We're preparing just like we have every game and it's worked out pretty good thus far.

TRAYVONN WRIGHT: Keep things consistent. My mindset's the same as every other game. Go out and try to win. Coach is the same way too. Just prepare the same way, go over the same schemes and different things we got to do on the court to win.

Q. Lawrence, you've had an opportunity now, I'm assuming, to watch some tape of Oklahoma and prepare for them this week. How do you feel that the Bisons stack up against the Sooners?

LAWRENCE ALEXANDER: We feel like it's pretty good. Watching tape, we feel like their style of play plays like Notre Dame's. They spread you out, penetrate, try to get flat footed threes. But, we believe if we stick to our principles, play defense, we'll be able to come out with a W.

Q. For any of you guys who think about

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these kind of things, it's become pretty routine for a 12 to upset a 5. And you guys are in the 12-5 matchup. And we saw yesterday, President Obama even is picking you guys to win this game. First of all, the Obama pick, does that put any more pressure on the way you think about this kind of thing and maybe why 12s are so frequently upsetting 5s.

TAYLOR BRAUN: I don't think these more higher profile people picking us to win changes our mindset. I definitely think that we're not going to catch Oklahoma off guard. I'm pretty sure we're going to get their best effort and best game. We have, both teams, earned the right to be in this position and both teams are preparing hard and it's going to be a very good, exciting game on Thursday. We're all looking forward to it.

MARSHALL BJORKLUND: Obviously, like Taylor said, it's kind of cool to watch Sportscenter and see President Obama picking us, but there's a lot of teams that have followed us all year that are picking us. The guys in our locker room, we know what we're capable of and we know what we're made of. So, yeah, it's kind of cool to see that, but like he said, we're going to get Oklahoma's best shot.

Q. Taylor, I know that you were pretty close to signing with a D2 school. What school was that and then what was the process in which you ended up in at North Dakota State?

TAYLOR BRAUN: It was Western Oregon University and I was just looking, I was kind of just holding out, hoping something good came up and somebody would give me an opportunity. And less and less schools, well schools kept saying I need to make a decision, these are D2 schools saying I needed to make a decision. And they started giving those scholarship offers away, because I was holding out for something better than I thought I was capable of.

It was getting to be end of April of my senior year. So, it was time for me to make a decision, because you got to get up there in the summer and start working. So, I was about a couple days away from signing with Western Oregon, then I got a phone call about North Dakota State. They just heard through the grapevine that I was a possible player that might be able to contribute. I sent them a game tape. The next week I went up there, I went up there finals week for them in beginning of May. So, it was very dead, not a lot of college atmosphere going around, but they offered me a scholarship

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and, to be honest, I wasn't overly thrilled with the -- just everything about it, but I know I wanted to be a Division I player and this was the opportunity I was given and I took it and it has been amazing. I wouldn't change it for anything.

Q. Taylor, for a lot of us that have not been to Fargo or been around, about all we know is the movie, what you guys have done on the football side and now what you've been doing on the basketball side, have you found that that's been changing perceptions about North Dakota and about Fargo?

TAYLOR BRAUN: Yeah, we -- I see our football team highlights on ESPN all the time, the Scott Van Pelt show and the football helmet's always up on that. So, we have got a lot more national exposure as a community.

Obviously, a lot of that has to do with the success of our football team. But this class that we have right now, we all came in the same time as the football team started having success too, so we have, both programs we came in together and we're close with a lot of the football players and I think that both teams have done a very good job of putting Fargo on the map and being a name to be recognized, I guess.

LAWRENCE ALEXANDER: I would say it's very positive for our program. Like Taylor was explaining, a lot of people don't know a lot about Fargo or our school NDSU, so I believe that our football team and our basketball team is doing a good job of putting Fargo on the map and getting people an opportunity to see our sports and our program.

Q. Marshall, follow-up on what Taylor was talking about, about putting North Dakota State on the map. What the football team has done, how much would the basketball team like to contribute? Because you know how visible the NCAA tournament is and a 12-5 upset.

MARSHALL BJORKLUND: Yeah, that would definitely put the basketball program and North Dakota State on the map. Yeah, with the football and basketball combined I think we have the most wins this year, don't we, with them combined. And so I think it's a combination of the two of them, I think it's really helped the university get attention and having college game day out in Fargo for football and, yeah, it's been a joy ride for us. It's been fun.

THE MODERATOR: All right. We'll take questions for coach.

Q. It's obviously pretty trendy for 12 seed to get picked in brackets over 5s. I don't know if that -- suddenly you guys are almost like a favorite in this thing, but when President Obama picks you on national TV, how does that change how you approach the guys' mindset, if at all.

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: I promise you that we don't view ourselves as anything but an underdog. And you look at it from any different angle, right down to their coach who is taken five, five programs to the NCAA tournament, they're the favorite. They know it, we know it. They can get mad if they want at the national pundits. Heres the funny thing, I would like to know how many people a that picked us have actually seen us play. I mean come on. I didn't see -- well Digger saw us play. I didn't see some of those guys, Obama was not at any of your our games I would have known that one. He didn't make his way to Fargo to see us play.

5-12s are always trendy, it's the way it's always going to be. We have got some statistics on paper that make us stand out a little bit. The field goal percentage in particular, the number of upperclassmen we have, but that's what people are going on. Like I say, let's have them dissect our program right now, because I think they would probably struggle to go for more than a minute and a half.

Q. What would a win tomorrow mean for the program and for NDSU?

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: It means we get to play together again, honestly. That's all you can think about. You can't get crazy with what could come next. It's as simple as this: I love this group of young men. They are a blast to coach and you've been there every step of the way, you know how I get along with these guys. And you know how much I love revel, absolutely love, coaching. I get to keep coaching them as a group. That's it. To me, I'll think about the possibilities of what it means long-term for our program, after this is over. But for right now, I want to keep coaching these guys, I'm having a blast.

Q. Your players were talking about the success of the program this year with football, game day, the whole nine yards, what's it been like from your chair?

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: Well, first of all, is that an Edgewood Golf Course? That's a great golf course, is it? Got a plug for them, maybe I can get a free round.

(Laughter.)

It's fun to see your friends succeed. I think with this program, one of the biggest things, and it's genuine, we're darn near neighbors. We kind of are neighbors, Jeff, you see how we get along. You see, as a staff up close the relationship that I have with Gene, that I have with Darren Mueller, our softball coach, that have I with Tod Brown, our baseball coach, it's fun to see friends do well. It is.

As far as, I mean our athletic department has kind of knocked it out of the park this year, by any means. You go from the basketball wins, football wins, to the fact that we raised -- finalized a 41 million dollars campaign or close to finalized. We're starting at 41 million dollar renovation of our arena. That's a decade for a lot of athletic departments. So it means, from my perspective, it's been even more amazing because I got to see it from the inside.

Q. After the Summit League Championship you mentioned, you were going to make sure that the guys had a blast at this tournament, stayed loose. After the excitement of the tournament announcement has died down, how have your guys been doing this week as far as taking in the moment that they have right now?

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: I asked them today, right after we watched some film, I said are you guys enjoying this? And then I went on to tell story after story about goofy phone calls they got or text messages or maybe an e-mail from a girl that dumped them right before prom saying I probably should have not gone that direction.

Yeah, everybody's got their stories and they have -- I hope we stayed loose. I think we have tried to. They're having fun. I don't know how loose they were up here, because Taylor Braun, I don't think is quite as at home in a press conference as some. Marshall Bjorklund is more comfortable in front of 3000 pigs than a group of -- he's a pig farmer, so I'm not calling anybody in here any names.

(Laughter.)

But, no, when we're alone and it's private, it's rolling pretty loose right now.

Q. You're going to have to defend the 3 obviously, tomorrow night. Is Oklahoma unique in the fact that they have got so many different guys who can launch and how worried are you about closing out on not just a couple of guys who might be hot, but up to five or six horses there?

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: Yeah, it's a unique attack that way. It's difficult to figure out where your help's going to come from sometimes. I think we can lean a little bit on our experience against Denver in our league, who shot a ton of 3's. In fact, the last regular season game of the year, they hit 15 3's against us in a game. We turned around and played them a week later down in Sioux Falls and we held them to one.

We don't get a mulligan this time, you got to play the first ball. So, we better. They are really good at attacking you off the dribble and freeing up guys flat footed on the perimeter. As good as anybody we have faced, certainly.

We got issues, but I think every 12 seed's got issues going in. That's a key component to us, yes. We have got to get them off that line and make them uncomfortable.

Q. You guys came out, I thought, and correct me if I'm wrong, a little bit tight in the title game in the Summit League against IPFW. Do you expect that you're over that hump now, now it's all fun and games?

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: Well I'll say this: That for us, in a lot of ways, and this is going to sound silly to people in this room, but when you're a Mid Major and you're in a one bid league, in a lot of ways that conference tournament presents more pressure than the next step. I know we were a lot looser when we played in Minneapolis with the 2009 group than we were prior in Sioux Falls. We tried to stay loose both times, we did.

But I'm telling you, I'm looking at -- you look at NIT, CBI games and you can point to games where that team wasn't interested in playing any more. It happens. Everybody wants to make the big dance. This is the show. This is where you want to be.

When you're dealing with that, and when you're dealing with the singular goal of these guys for four or five years has been to make it here, yeah, I was feeling tight. But, that seems to kind of the weight's come off the shoulders a little bit. I just like this opportunity. This is fun.

Q. Being from Tulsa, I want to ask you about Oral Roberts, they got out of the Summit League, next year they're getting back in?

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: Who invited them back? I liked it better without them.

Q. Tell me about the whole perception of the league now. You got a team that defects to another conference and now they want back in. They're coming back in?

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: Well, first of all, it's really good for our league. I say that, but I mean it's really good for our league. I think that's what you're getting at. And I really like their staff. They're a class group. It's going to be fun having some friends back in the league.

I think it says volumes for our league. I think our league has come a long way. And quite honestly, last year at this time if I was being completely truthful, I would have said that we're going to survive, but I couldn't have given you a template for how.

Oral Roberts coming back, I think you got to -- this is a league with up side. You've got some programs right now, UNO coming through this transition is doing pretty darn well already. And that's a really good Mid Major situation to recruit to. IUPUI, moving to a new arena. Very good situation. We're opening a new arena. It's really positive, it's positive for our league, I hope it's positive for ORU, I know it's positive for North Dakota State.

Q. That's a lot of positives. Do you think there will be any animosity about the whole defector thing, you guys left and you were seeking greener pastures?

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: I've got animosity they're coming back. No one ever likes seeing them in Sioux Falls. No, I mean, I'm pretty close with the guys in our conference and I don't think that's ever been mentioned. Yeah, you're a little miffed when they leave, but they want to come back? Great. They like us again. I don't think anybody has -- I shouldn't speak for everybody, I know I don't have a chip on my shoulder over that at all. I'm -- it's good. Hopefully we can build this thing into a multiple bid league, that's the ultimate goal. And at least it's faint on the horizon right now. It's not completely out of the realm of possibility down the road.

Q. We talked Monday night, I fly up here Tuesday, wake up this morning and read in the Spokane paper that they fired the Washington State coach and they're throwing your name out as a strong candidate. Is that just a product of success when your name gets tossed around for jobs like that?

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: Yeah. I mean, it doesn't mean anything. I received no contact, I received no contact from anyone. And you know what? I really like my boss and I really like my school and if I was thinking about anything other than this group of guys right now, that would be about as selfish as you can get. Yeah, it's fun seeing your name in the paper. You got to understand we're up in Fargo, man I get on the Inforum, I get on KVLV, I got Bison Illustrated, but to see some national people talking about us, that's fun. And they're not just talking about me, that, our team did this. As far as when we went in 2009 a lot of people, this is miles team you're winning with Miles' team, great, great, great. You know what? This is Dave Richmond's team, it is my team just as much as it was my team back then as it was Miles' team. We're a group. You can't do it alone. I certainly know after reading the CBS article on how I was the 53rd best player I couldn't get there by myself. How about that? You know what? The guys are all giving me heck about it. 53rd best player in the tournament. And I said, you know, I was like, yeah, boy, that's just not right. Then I kind of walked away going, 53, that's pretty high for me. That's not bad. Gave myself a little fist pump.

True story: One time it was late in the game my senior year, Bo comes over, Bo Ryan gets over in his crouch and the guys behind me are my buddies yelling, we want Saul, we want Saul. He leans over in front of me and he goes, hey, go see what they want.

(Laughter.)

So that really happened.

Q. Oklahoma averages 87 points, you lead the league or you lead the country in field goal percentage, is defense going to be a factor tomorrow?

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: We're not going to play any. It's fun to watch scoring. Let's get up-and-down. Let's go all Denver Nuggets 1982. Dan Issel.

No, you got to figure it out. The first team to figure out a way to get stops, that's going to be very important. I know, you look at their defensive

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stats I think are skewed, because I think they have played a lot better defense as the year's gone on because they have got a young roster that is getting more and more experience. I think you could take some of those games early from both of us probably away a little bit with the ref'ing rules. We played some games where free throws were in the 40's for a team.

That's gone away. Partially because I think we have taught better and partially because you think the refs have a better understanding of what they're supposed to be calling.

So I look at the here and now. They're pretty good defensively and quite honestly, I thought late in the year we went through a stretch there where we went for two or three weeks without anybody scoring 60 on us. I think we got better too. That being said, there's some weapons out on that court offensively. And that, you know what? It's fun to watch those games. This could be exciting.

If you run out of questions before I run out of answers, that doesn't bode well for you. Hop in here. What have you got? What did you have for dinner last night? Anything.

(Laughter.) There's no way I let this press conference die before my allotted time. It's just not my nature. Anybody that follows us knows that.

(Laughter.) Man, oh man. Okay. Thank you, brother, I owe you a soda after this baby.

Q. We love most of our coaches in Oklahoma, but if we ever have a job opening would you please apply.

(Laughter.)

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: I just don't stop talking, do I? That's it, I'm out of here. No, anybody else? I'm sorry.

Q. Coach, there's so many coaches today that seem to have the Bill Belichick model when it comes to dealing with the media where they're closed lipped, closed practices at this, maybe stand offish, but you're the exact opposite where you enjoy interacting with the media and have that energy. So where did you get that from an how does that fit into your philosophy as far as the game of basketball and coaching?

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: I like the media so much that I sleep with a media member. It's my wife. There's no -- she writes an article for the

Forum.

Listen, we get so many chances to have this stage, right? I mean, let's face it, we do. I'm going to enjoy it. This is great. And I think that again those around me a little more probably realize that I don't have a lot of bad days. I've known since I was very, very young, third, fourth -- I've always known since I have ever thought about what I was going to do for a living I knew this is what I wanted to do. And are you kidding me? Here I sit with all you guys sitting there listening to me. This is stupid. I don't know how this worked out. But, yeah, I'm going to enjoy it.

THE MODERATOR: All right, we'll end with that.

COACH SAUL PHILLIPS: Thank you.

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