

HEAD COACH BEN HOWLAND

Opening Statement

"We are excited for this season. We have made several changes this year, including the floor. I love our new floor. I hope you have had a chance to take photos of that. It is so much better. I can actually move right now and feel the floor move because it is giving. It's much healthier for our student-athletes. I am excited about our team. We are incredibly young, the youngest team I have ever coached. We have seven freshmen on scholarship and another couple freshmen that are walk-ons. We are unbelievably young. We are going to make a lot of mistakes this year, but we are going to make them trying our hardest and doing our very best. I think these kids are practicing really hard. There are not enough hours in the day for us right now as we try to learn to become a competitive team by SEC play starting Jan. 3. Our veterans, starting with I.J., Q and Aric, are doing a good job leading. They have done a good job with their leadership. I've been very pleased with them. You can see all three of those kids are much improved from a year ago, this time. That is what we are building here, having continuity, having stability so that year after year a kid in this program gets better on a year-in and year-out basis. This is really going to be an exciting year because they are so young. We are going to end up playing six freshmen every night. I think I saw somewhere that we are the fourth youngest team in the country going into the season. That kind of says it all right there. We are actually scrimmaging the youngest team in the country, Georgia Tech, on Saturday over in Birmingham. Those are two, very young teams going against each other. We are trying to gauge where we are right now."

On the make-up of the team...

"I'll be honest. The depth is an issue. In terms of how many guys we have out here every day. For example, Abdul Ado, who was able to practice with us from the beginning of the school year until the end of September where he only had the two hour a week rule. I am so excited about him, but we are still waiting for some kind of final word on whether or not he will be deemed eligible. It will probably be a week to 10 days before we know if he's eligible. It's been tough. He's been able to get in the weight room and work with Coach (David) Deets, but outside of that he's not able to do anything. I.J. Ready could not practice with us yesterday. He has had some continued issues with his stomach. We think it is acid reflux and not mono related. He has had this issue for about 4 days now. It just comes down to having enough guys. Xavian Stapleton is making great progress right now. We are not going to rush that. He's seven and a half months post surgery right now, and we are looking for him to be ready to go at about the nine-month mark. We will get him some game action by the end of December. Those three guys, especially the two, Abdul and Xavian, leave us with 10 guys. Joe Strugg has done a good job bouncing back from his multiple surgeries a year ago but still not truly a hundred percent. So we really have nine healthy players including I.J. Those kids have really done a great job bringing it every day. We are working on basic fundamentals, defensively, jumping to the ball, seeing the ball and your man, blocking out and contesting the shots. Rotating over and taking a path to the basket. Just basic things that will become second nature to our guys defensively. Offensively we haven't gotten a lot of sets in yet. We are trying to do a great job in transition. We are trying to get early opportunities to run the floor. We are getting in better condition. We are working 40 minutes in the mornings, just shooting. Getting extra shots up. Our practices probably average two and a half hours a day."

On the best part of a young team ...

"Their energy and exuberance. This is all new to them, all new. Every game is on national television and everything is being recorded. You are all being watched. The amount of scrutiny

at this level of basketball is all different. The team chemistry is so much farther along. Our trip to Italy helped us so much with team unity. That is so exciting because we are going to be in a foxhole together. We will face a lot of adversity and how you deal with that adversity as a team and as an individual is the key to success.”

On the front four players...

“I wish we had more depth there. It is really hard to not have Abdul out on the court. So really right now our front four consist of Aric Holman, Mario Kegler, E.J. Datcher and Schnider Herard. I am excited for these kids. They are going to be thrown into the fire. We are playing six freshmen every night. They are all going to play and so they will all get game time experience. They are going to be playing against really good.”