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An Interview With:

COACH LISA BLUDER

LISA BLUDER: People keep asking me what I feel about the season coming up, and when I think about it, I kind of think of the yin and the yang of our season. Everybody says, oh, "my gosh, you lost Kachine," but we return four starters. That's pretty good. Then you think, okay, they're a real veteran team, but we have five freshmen on this team. That's a lot of freshmen. But then you think of those freshmen, and those freshmen are pretty darn good.

With all that being said, we have so much to be excited about with this season. We're going for our fifth straight 20-win season in a row, our fifth straight NCAA tournament appearance. We return four starters, we have the 11th-best recruiting class in the nation. We have a new practice facility, we have a new locker room, we have the revitalized Carver-Hawkeye Arena, and this team is ready to go.

You can tell we have a lot of confidence in this group of women. When I go to practice every day, I go to practice with Kamille Wahlin, who I think is the most experienced point guard in the Big Ten. There's nobody I'd rather have leading our basketball team than Kamille Wahlin.

We have Jaime Printy, one of the best shooters in the nation, already on the Wade Watch list, already on the John Wooden preseason list.

We have Morgan Johnson, one of the tallest players in the conference, has great height, great mobility, and also some tremendous experience at the center position.

We return Kelly Krei, three-point weapon and a senior who has really grown to be a leader this year and has just become an all-around player.

We also have Kalli Hansen back. Kalli is playing with great composure and confidence this year as a senior.

We return Theairra Taylor. She's healthy. We return Trisha Nesbitt. She's healthy.

We have five freshmen: Sam Logic, who can really play about any position that we need to have her play.

We have Virginia Johnson. Virginia is probably one of the most gifted athletes that I've ever coached.

We have Melissa Dixon, who is a great three-point shooter with tremendous range, and she's going to fit right into our offense.

We have Kathryn Reynolds, another smart point guard that can score, as well.

And then Bethany Doolittle, which is the height we didn't have last year.

So we have a lot to be excited about. We know, though, that we're also up -- we face a very challenging schedule this year. We're playing a variety of different teams from different conferences with different styles. Our opening tournament includes Harvard, Butler and UNLV. We're going to host Drake from the in-state rivals, but then we are also hosting Virginia Tech in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge. We play at Iowa State, we play at Kansas State in the Big Ten/Big 12 Challenge. We have to play at UNI. We're also playing St. John's and possibly Texas A & M, the defending national champions, in a neutral court in the Bahamas. So that's going to be quite a really good Thanksgiving tournament for us.

But we're also welcoming Nebraska into the Big Ten. We're playing them both home and away, so that will be the first time that we're facing Nebraska since we faced them in the WNIT several years ago at their place. So we may have a little yin and yang to our season, but I really can't wait to see how this season unfolds.

Q. You knew Jaime was going to be a special player. Is she progressing about as good as you think, or is she exceeding a little bit?

LISA BLUDER: You always have high hopes for your players when you recruit them. We always look like geniuses if we can sit here and say "yep, she's exactly where we thought she was going to be," and that's not realistic. I don't think you sit here and think they're going to be Wade Watch or John Wooden when you recruit them. You just hope that every player comes in here and develops into their potential and becomes the best they can be, and I think Jaime is doing that. Jaime has really worked on her all-around game. She's not just a three-point shooter. We all know she can penetrate, get to the rim, score on free throws. We all know she's developed her passing game, so she's become an all-around player. She's worked hard on our defense since her freshman year. I think Jaime has improved since she's been here. We're happy where she's at, but there's always more room for improvement. That's the beauty of this game is you can never be satisfied with where you are.

Q. What's the specific health improvement you've seen with Theairra and Trisha lately?

LISA BLUDER: Well, they're both playing, which is different than what it was this summer and last year. Theairra is one year out from her ACL tear, and she's been doing almost everything in practice. I wouldn't say she's 100 percent, but I would say she's 75 percent, which is better than we've seen her since her freshman year, the beginning of her freshman year.

Right now, I think for Theairra it's mentally being able to overcome the idea of this has happened to me the last -- three times in the last 20 months, and that's tough mentally to overcome. Theairra is gifted. We all know that. We'd love to have her on the floor, what she brings skill-wise to the basketball court. And so mentally it's just getting over that hurdle of I can do this, I'm confident, my leg is good, I can handle this.

With Trisha, she's doing much more than I ever dreamed she'd be doing by this point. She is doing almost everything, almost 100 percent of practice. I never dreamed that we would be at this point right now. We're very excited about having both of those players back.

Q. How confident are you in the five freshmen that they can step in right away?

LISA BLUDER: I'm more confident because of our foreign trip. I think with that foreign trip we got those ten extra practices, which could not have come at a better time with five freshmen. I think we utilized those very well, and I think at that time they understood, yes, I do fit in, I am a Division I player. Right now around the country, those freshmen are just trying to figure that out. Ours figured it out this summer, and that gives them a big head start. Also, they played in all the games. Everybody played overseas, everybody scored overseas, and I think just playing those three games in a competitive situation, now they know that they belong here, and I think they really feel a part of the team. So I think that has helped us, otherwise it could be kind of nervous.

Q. Looking at the Big Ten schedule, they got rid of that one early game that everybody really didn't like. This year you'll play 16 games, but there are six teams that you only play once. What are your thoughts about the Big Ten schedule this year?

LISA BLUDER: I really enjoy that we are only playing 16 games. I think that's good for us. I think it's good for our conference. It's what most of the power conferences, the BCS conferences are doing is 16 games. So I'm glad that we're there.

Now, here's the yin and yang of that. Saying that, am I happy with only playing -- having to go to three places and not getting them on our home court? That seems like a lot. I don't know, again, when you play that few games if you get a true Big Ten champion at the end of the day, and that's what makes me nervous because I think the strength of your schedule can be deceptive as to who really is the best team in the Big Ten conference. That's when your conference tournament becomes really important.

Q. Who's really stepped up into a leadership role? Kachine was so good at that last year. Is that kind of leadership by committee or has anybody really stepped up?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, I would say it's more leadership by committee, and I think the thing we miss Kachine most is the fire she brings, the enthusiasm she brings. Megan Considine was really trying to fulfill that role for us, and she was voted captain by our team as a senior, and

unfortunately with her torn Achilles, she's on the sidelines. It's a lot tougher to be that role when you're on the sidelines. You can still contribute, but it's a lot harder to do.

We don't have that person on the floor that really just gets everybody excited. Morgan Johnson is probably our best. She really has the most enthusiasm. I think Trisha Nesbitt is probably next best on our team. But it's going to have to be -- just like the rebounds, not one person is going to take all those rebounds that Kachine had. It's going to have to be a group effort, and I think it's the same thing with that fire.

Q. Is that something you'd like to see from Jaime?

LISA BLUDER: Yeah, I think Jaime could talk a lot more. I think that Jaime really focuses on her game and doesn't realize the value sometimes of getting other people excited or showing that emotion on the floor, and she could definitely develop that part of her game. I think when you're a captain and when you're a leader, you worry about yourself and you lead by example, but you also have to lead other people, and I think that's what Jaime still has to learn a little bit is how do you lead other people, how do you boost other people's confidence, how do you hold other people accountable, how do you gather people and redirect them, refocus them when things aren't going well.

Kamille Wahlin is really trying hard at this, and Kamille is a senior on our team and she's doing a good job of it.

Kelly Krei, that is not her thing. She's not a vocal person. She's not this really bubbly person on the floor. Kelly is trying so hard to come out of the box there, and I'm just so proud of her because it's uncomfortable for her to do it and she's doing it to help the team. I just think I see a different level of Kelly's commitment as a senior and as a leader on this team.

Q. Is Jaime all the way recovered from her wrist surgery and have you noticed a difference in the way she shoots?

LISA BLUDER: No, it still goes in, thank goodness. She's shooting the ball well. She still has her range. No, she's doing very well, and she is back. The biggest thing for her this summer was she was out of shape with the surgery, but now she's getting that back under control. She's good.

Q. Will you have Trisha playing mostly one to back up Kamille, or will she be able to swing into the two once in a while?

LISA BLUDER: She will be mostly backing up the point guard, but I never say never, and things can certainly change as people get in foul trouble or somebody tweaks something here and there during the year, but right now the plan is to have her mostly at the point guard. I feel like with Theairra back and you've got Sam, and there's so many good play that can play that wing position to give us a little more height.

Q. In the Big Ten race Penn State is getting hype. They won 25 games last year, return four starters. Purdue won 21 games in spite of a lot of illness and injuries. Just your thoughts on the Big Ten conference season.

LISA BLUDER: I think those two teams, like you say, are definitely the favorites. Penn State, I think they could be a top-eight team in the country this year. I think they're that good. And Purdue, I mean, they just have so many weapons. They're so athletic. I think they're extremely loaded, as well.

So I think those two teams are the top tier, and I think it's the next tier of teams I think that we're in in the preseason; us, Michigan State, Ohio State are all in that kind of next grouping; three, four, five in the preseason polls I would guess when those come out in another week or so.

Q. Talk about your second five. Is this the most talented group you've had for a second five?

LISA BLUDER: It's the youngest maybe group we've had in a while. Not ever but in a while. But I do think it is one of the more talented groups of people coming off the bench. That's what we saw in Europe that was so much fun is that you could just keep bringing weapons off the bench, and they bring a different dimension, too, when they come in. You bring Virginia, and she can get up around the rim. She just is beautiful to watch as an athlete, and you've got Melissa Dixon who comes in, and she has that Jaime Printy type of range and a quick shot. So you have people coming in off the bench that really cannot just fill minutes but can contribute, as well.

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Q. Does that change your philosophy with defense, more pressing and things like that?

LISA BLUDER: We are experimenting with a little bit more different style defensively, and I think that'll be a lot of fun. I think it's been fun for us coaches and players that we are deeper at this point. We have 12 healthy players right now, and I don't remember the last time that we've been able to say that. But it does enable us to do two things; one is be able to pick up a little bit more pressure in the full court, and also be a little bit more up-tempo. And we've always tried to be up-tempo, but I think when you have 12 healthy players that are just chomping at the bit to get on that court, boy, you can really rotate some people in to keep your transition game going, as well.

Q. Can you describe Samantha's role?

LISA BLUDER: Samantha's role, we're still kind of playing with that. I know she's going to be on the court a lot, but she could play a variety of positions. She's a player that spent most of her high school career playing at the point guard, but we have spent a lot of time having her at the wing position. This year with Kamille, we quite honestly don't need her at point guard but we need her on the floor, so we've got to find a place to have her on the floor. This summer she started for us at the three position, and Sam can play -- in my opinion she can play the one, two, three or four. She's physical enough to defend down there. She's a good enough ball handler, passer, to play in the guard position. And then Kalli Hansen, again, she's doing a tremendous job, too, coming in at the wing position.

Q. Bethany probably didn't play with a lot of players that were her size in high school, but she seemed to match up pretty well with Morgan this summer. Do you see a lot of improvement in her on a day-to-day basis when she's going against Morgan?

LISA BLUDER: I am very excited about having a post that has the height nearly of Morgan. She's not quite as tall as Morgan but almost, and to have another player like that that's skilled that can score, she had a terrific senior season in high school, and so we really feel like we got a good catch with Bethany. Big players are very difficult to find, and here's one that's good, and so we're excited about Bethany and what her future holds.

It's really a nice time for her to come in because you have Morgan for two more years,

they can battle it in practice, but at the same time she's learning so much from Morgan and gaining a lot of confidence that she can go in. She's going to get a lot of minutes this year.

Q. Iowa got to the free throw 200 more times than their opponents last year where you really cashed in. Is getting to the free-throw line and drawing the contact another key part of the plan this year?

LISA BLUDER: It is. That's a big part of our offense. We're a good free-throw shooting team. We want to get there. We want to put their best players on the bench. We also want to have the opportunities to get to the free-throw line, so we're very -- we believe in our offense, and we believe that we can attack really well.

Q. Some of your starters played 33 plus minutes per game. Does two or three minutes less really make a difference over the course of a season do you think?

LISA BLUDER: I think it does. I think it adds up. I just think when you're playing two Big Ten games a week, and in the non-conference season playing three games a week against terrific competition, that those extra minutes of rest that you get really do make a difference for you. So in my opinion it does.

I think competition brings out the best in you, too, when you're starting but you know somebody behind you is playing pretty darned well, and if all of a sudden I don't box out or I don't talk or I don't have my hands up on a close-out that I know I can go to the bench kind of reinforces -- it's a good reinforcer. It's kind of like having another coach out there.

Q. Will you get the chance to sub punitively a little bit more than maybe in the past if somebody is not performing and not having their best game?

LISA BLUDER: We certainly weren't able to do that in the past. When you have a very small bench, you don't always get to do that, then you really substitute sometimes out of necessity; somebody is really exhausted or somebody is in foul trouble. But now you can bring somebody to the bench maybe to talk a little bit about what they need to work on.

Q. The last two years in the NCAA tournament, Iowa has had to play Stanford on their home court and Gonzaga on their home court. Do you think the NCAA will ever get to a little more neutral sites, or do they still feel the attendance would suffer too much?

LISA BLUDER: Still, the attendance is going to suffer is how they feel. I think it's unfortunate. I think it's a bad thing for our game. We're playing for the national tournament, and you're playing on people's home courts. It's unfair, but it's where our game is right now, and I don't think I'm going to be able to change it, so I have to live with it.

Q. Is there like a mantra or an overriding theme that the team has expressed this off season trying to get better?

LISA BLUDER: No, but I'm glad you brought that up. It's something that we really do need to think about. But no, there's nothing that really sticks out that -- some slogan or some feeling that our team has. Again, it's just so -- it's such a diverse group. You've got this veteran group but then you've got this young group, so that's kind of what we've been doing really is a lot more experimenting with roles, learning -- a lot of learning has gone on, but there's nothing the team is really hanging their hat on right now saying this is how we feel. Not that I know of yet.

Q. Have you seen the curtain down yet and are you liking that change to Carver?

LISA BLUDER: You know, we just had practice in there today and it was down and I really didn't pay much attention to it, which I guess is a good thing. I think the curtain is good because it brings people down closer, but do I want it down for our games? Probably not. I don't want to have it down. I want to have it up. I want to have so many people that we have to have the curtains up in the arena. But if it gives us a better home court advantage, I'm all for it.

Q. The Big Ten women's tournament after this year is going to go up to the suburbs of Chicago at the Sears Center in Hoffman Estates. Just your thoughts on moving from Indy up to the suburbs.

LISA BLUDER: Indy has been a great host for us. Conseco is a beautiful arena. Indianapolis is a great sports downtown. But I think having it in Hoffman Estates gives us an advantage with our fans. I think that our fans will

be able to travel to Hoffman Estates a little bit easier than they were to Indianapolis, so I think for us it'll give us a little better fan support, but it can't top Conseco as far as an arena, but I'll take the fan support from Iowa fans over that any day.

Q. What has impressed you most about Logic?

LISA BLUDER: What's impressed me the most? I know what's impressed our players is probably having "Nike" written across their face a couple times because they're not expecting it. You've got to be ready for the ball, and if you take your eyes off of it for a second, it can be there planted on the side of your cheek. You need to be ready for it, and I think that's left an impression on our players. What's impressed me is the quickness of her pass, the strength of her pass, her ability to see the floor, to see plays develop before they are there, and with that comes some timing that the players have got to get used to. She's got to get the confidence that her players are going to continue their cuts once they start a cut, and her teammates have to realize to never take your eyes off the ball.

Kind of like a little bit like Johanna Solverson when she was here, kind of the same thing.

Q. If you had to put a team out on the floor today would you start the four returning starters and Logic?

LISA BLUDER: That's what I would probably do if I had to start today, a group. But again, Kalli Hansen is right there, if that position was required.

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