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An Interview With:

COACH LISA BLUDER

COACH LISA BLUDER: I was traveling today listening to some tapes, and I heard a great quote and I really thought it described our season quite a bit. And the quote went like this: "Failure is nothing more than the necessary dress rehearsal for future successes." And I really believe that's true.

And when I think about our team this year, I feel like last year was a dress rehearsal for what can happen this year for our basketball team. There are so many reasons to be enthused about this year. We have every starter back from last year's team, every player back from last year's team that just shot the lights out.

We had the best sophomore class in the Big Ten Conference, and they are now all juniors with unbelievable playing experience behind them. Johanna Solverson returns to our basketball team. Johanna was a three-year starter for us and a very important part of our program and has been out for the last two years. Thankfully, the NCAA recognized the value in giving her another year of eligibility, and she will be back for her sixth year and has also been voted as one of our team co-captains.

JoAnn Hamlin becomes eligible. JoAnn Hamlin had a very, very impressive freshman year at Kansas State University. She had to sit out last year. We had her in practice but we had to sit her out according to NCAA rules. She is now eligible to play and should be an impact player for us right off the bat.

We have two incoming freshmen, Kelsey Cermak who won a state championship at Norwalk in Iowa as a junior; and also Kachine Alexander from Minneapolis, Minnesota, who also won a state championship as a junior and was named MVP of

her state championship team in the state tournament, so tremendous athletes coming in there.

We have five seniors this year. Last year we had zero seniors on our basketball team. We have five seniors this year, and I've always believed that teams do not do remarkable things without special seniors. We have special seniors this year.

We are deeper at every position than we have been in a long, long time. And we also have seasoned, intelligent guards surrounded by big, strong post players, and to me that's a lethal combination.

The most important thing is, it just feels right. You walk into our practice and it just feels right. The chemistry is there; the optimism is there; the enthusiasm is there; and it just feels right. And our players are excited about the season and they are ready to go out and prove what they are capable of doing.

We have a terrific schedule again this year. We'll be hosting Drake University, one of our in-state rivals, in our second game of the year on November 13th, a team that was in the NCAA Tournament last year; and we're also playing at UNI and also at Iowa State.

Also this year we'll be starting the first of a four-year Big Ten/ACC Challenge hosting Georgia Tech in Carver-Hawkeye Arena on November 28 and that's going to be a tremendous matchup. Obviously, the ACC is the No. 1 women's basketball Conference in America right now, and for us to have Georgia Tech coming into Carver-Hawkeye Arena is a tremendous opportunity for our fans to see a tremendous, nationally-watched women's basketball game.

Also in our own Hawkeye Challenge Tournament, we've got some great competition coming in with Saint Joseph's coming in, and also Wyoming coming in, who is the defending WNIT champion.

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When we go down to Cancún to play, our first opponent will be Arizona State, currently ranked as high as No. 15 in some of the polls. So they are going to be an exceptional basketball team, a team that made it to the Sweet 16 last year. We'll also be playing Mississippi State, another very athletic basketball team.

So a tremendous schedule and a very, very good home schedule. And of course, we have 18 Big Ten games this year instead of 16 Big Ten games, and that's also going to be I think a positive change for our conference and for our basketball team.

We just have a few staff changes I'm excited about, Shannon Gage is coming back to our basketball program. She spent two years as our director of basketball operations. She went to Michigan to pursue being an assistant coach and we were lucky enough to recruit her and bring her back to the University of Iowa. And Shannon brings about great enthusiasm, a professionalism, a great work ethic, and she's already making tremendous inroads with our recruiting efforts. So I'm excited to welcome Shannon back.

We've also added a new position to our program, that I'm equally as excited about, and that's a videographer, and we've never had this position in women's basketball before. We hired Lindsay Davis this year, a graduate of the University of Iowa, and she will also be a very important element to our future success. This position and this addition brings us on par to what other teams have had and will help us with preparation and game evaluations, and I think it will be a great resource for us, so I'm excited about that.

As you can tell, we have a lot of things that we are very enthused about this year and I think when you go down to the floor and have the opportunity to meet our players again, you will sense their enthusiasm, as well.

Q. Are the juniors ready to take over the team?

COACH LISA BLUDER: Yeah, I think they did last year. Those three sophomores all received Big Ten honors last year, and as sophomores that's quite an accomplishment.

So I think they did great things for our team last year, and obviously now as juniors, they are ready to continue it. But I think they had such good success last year in getting some individual honors, they just want to take it to the team level

now and have our team get some tremendous team honors.

Q. Injuries?

COACH LISA BLUDER: Right now I have 13 bodies and I haven't had 13 bodies in practice for a long, long time. It feels really, really good and it's wonderful.

This year, we're probably going to have to actually make some coaching decisions with playing time. In the past it's just kind of look down the bench and see who had a uniform on and put them in. Now we are going to have to make some good, wise decisions. So it's going to be a great problem to have.

Q. With the seniors, what can this team do?

COACH LISA BLUDER: I feel like our team also has a desire to get back in the NCAA Tournament and also make some noise in the tournament. We have a great desire to be in the top of this Big Ten Conference, and I think this conference this year is going to be as strong as it's ever been. We didn't lose a lot of people at graduation; our team didn't lose anybody and neither did Wisconsin nor Illinois, and probably another team in there, as well.

This conference was not hit hard by graduation last year with the exception obviously of Jessica Davenport and Katie Geraldts, who are our two key players that we lost last year; but really a lot of people return to this conference and it's going to be very, very tough conference. But I do think that we can do some remarkable things this year.

Q. What is it about the seniors that they bring to the table, and what have you seen from your seniors already?

COACH LISA BLUDER: I think seniors lead in a different way. And it's not that juniors and sophomores and freshmen don't want to lead; it's that they can't lead in the same way that a person that is putting on the Iowa uniform for the last time; and this is their last opportunity to make an impact. It's their last opportunity -- you just approach the season in an entirely different manner when this is it for you.

I think they also have valuable experience, just game experiences, practice experiences, academic experiences, that you can't expect your freshmen and sophomores to have. And it's up to

them to give that information to your freshmen and sophomore class, but I think it's really difficult to emulate what a senior can bring to the basketball team.

I think if we would have had a couple of seniors on our team last year, a couple of those close games that we had, could have turned it around.

Q. The fact that last season, Iowa opponents scored 71 points a game, defensively what changes do you have to make this season to get that number down?

COACH LISA BLUDER: Defense, definitely it was our Achilles heel last year; we could shoot the lights out of the ball but we couldn't defend that. Our players understand that. We have preached to them, and they have heard it and they understand that they need to make a change in that.

We have made some changes in our defensive philosophy and that shows postseason when the season was over, we have made some technical changes in our defense. We're going back to more of an aggressive/denial defense than what we played the last couple of years, more of a sagging-style defense. And we also changed our zone defense, and our trip to Greece gave us ten practices that we were able to implement those changes, and obviously this preseason we have continued with that.

Also, I think just having a deeper team helps you play defense. I think when you are not very deep, it's real hard for those players to play as hard as they can on both ends of the floor when they are playing 36, 37 minutes a game; and they don't want to risk getting that foul because they know there's not a lot of other people to go in there for them. I think if your team is deeper, you can play harder, and also you can play a little more risk-free because you're not worried about picking up that silly foul because you're being a little more aggressive at that time.

Q. Do you feel like this year's team is deeper than past teams?

COACH LISA BLUDER: I feel like we've got a solid -- we're going to have a solid backup at every position, and again that depth is going to mean so much for us this year.

Q. Talking about offense, you broke some records last year.

COACH LISA BLUDER: Absolutely, I think the players are very confident in their ability to shoot the basketball. We were second in the nation in three-point shooting. We were fifth in the nation in free throw shooting. We were in the top 25 in the country in assists.

So definitely our team, our players, know how to shoot the ball and definitely know how to distribute the ball. But as we alluded to, it's the defensive side we need to clean up.

Q. What kind of year would you like to see Megan Skouby have?

COACH LISA BLUDER: You know, last year, I don't think Megan was really happy with her performance and I think she would probably be one of the first ones to tell you that. She had a good year last year, but she didn't have a spectacular year, and I think we all expect spectacular things out of Megan.

Megan did obviously have the broken hand last year and missed several games and had to play the remaining part of the season with a cast on her hand, and I don't think anyone can play up to their top level wearing a cast.

But Megan, the sky is the limit for Megan. She has tremendous size, great mobility, an ability to shoot the basketball very well, and I see tremendous improvement in her work ethic from the past two years.

Q. Will there be less playing time for some players because of the depth?

COACH LISA BLUDER: You know, competition brings out the best in you, and we're seeing that in our team right now. When you have somebody breathing down your neck to get that playing time, it just makes you go a little bit -- somewhere you find a little spark of extra energy that you didn't know you had when somebody else is breathing down your back for that playing time.

So, I think it's tremendous to have competition. And JoAnn Hamlin not only brings us depth to provide competition, because she will be fighting for a starting position, there's no doubt, and she'll make no bones about that to anybody and make no apologies to anybody; that she's here to try to earn that starting position.

I also think JoAnn brings to the table, you know, a competitiveness -- a competitive level that is very hard to emulate. I don't know if we've had somebody this competitive since Jennie Lillis was

on the floor, Jennie Lillis, Lindsey Meder, incredibly competitive people; she's a competitive person. I tell you, I wouldn't want to beat her in ping-pong in my basement because I'm afraid of what she would do to my basement. She's a competitive kid.

Q. Does she bring a toughness?

COACH LISA BLUDER: She brings a toughness, and it really showed in Greece. We played the national team there and they are an athletic team, but they are very physical. We were in the first game I think surprised at how physical this great team was. But, I didn't see us back down.

And I think in the past when somebody was physical with us last year, we backed down a little bit; we didn't back down when JoAnn Hamlin was on the floor. In fact, we bonded together and raised our intensity and matched their intensity that third game.

Q. Is there a player that you think is going to really emerge this year or maybe show flashes?

COACH LISA BLUDER: You know, since we did return everybody, I don't know that there's one person that's really going to like -- you know, I would really think that JoAnn Hamlin and Johanna Solverson are X-factors, people that have great experience that people didn't count on last year. Obviously we could not count on them last year.

I think Jeneé Graham has a different offensive mentality than she's had the past several years. She shot the ball more often in Greece than she probably did during the entire season. And Jeneé Graham has a beautiful shot and we just want to encourage her to show that off. And I think she understands that she can't be a one-dimensional player for us and that she needs to contribute on both ends.

Q. With such a veteran team, how do you see the freshmen?

COACH LISA BLUDER: I expect they will have more traditional freshman years this year. We have not had the luxury of the past several years of having traditional freshman years. Our freshmen have been expected to make impact minutes for us right off the bat, and I think that this year, our freshmen will come in and be able to learn in an environment that is not so stressful.

And I think that's probably the best way for a freshman to learn. Not that they won't be used

and not that they won't be counted on, but I think it will be a learning environment; that they will come in and learn without the stress of, 'I have to contribute, or else; or else our team has not been successful.' I think that's not been the case this year and I think it's going to be better development for them that way.

Q. How is Johanna?

COACH LISA BLUDER: Johanna is doing very well. She is back and she is doing everything. This summer we held her out of the competition for Greece and held her out of the game time league, and a lot of that was to give her a couple extra months to completely heal. She had the go-ahead; the doctors gave her the green light to go, but we just felt like giving her a couple extra months certainly couldn't hurt. And it was a lot more mental than anything else. She had hurt her leg in the summer both times. Why have her play in the summer when mentally, that's when she had done it the last couple of years?

So we just felt like it was best for her to not play this summer, which she certainly could have, and I know she is anxious to get on the floor. You know, I think it's hard when you went through two ACLs and you haven't played for two years; you want to be at the same level that you were before those injuries. I don't know if that's realistic for us to expect that of Johanna.

Johanna will definitely give us everything she has as far as effort and leadership. Will she be as quick as she was prior to two ACLs? I don't know. Will she be able to react? I don't know. Offensively, she's about where she was; I don't know about defensively.

Q. If rebounding is an attitude, last year we struggled in rebounding -- with your size and experience, do you think you can reestablish -- inaudible -- do you expect that?

COACH LISA BLUDER: You know, I do expect that. And that's something that's always been one of my passions. I love rebounding. I think it's a tremendous part of the game to give you an advantage to win is that you've got to be a good rebounding team. And you have to have more opportunities to shoot the ball and you have to take away those opportunities from your opponent. And one of the biggest and easiest ways to do that is by rebounding. I'm a huge believer, and it's one of the first rules I've worked on in practice.

One of the first things we work on in practice to make the players understand it's very, very important. I do believe it's an attitude and I do believe it's also athletic and I do believe fatigue can really take your rebounding away. And I believe that last year, fatigue took our rebounding away, and I suspect we will be back up in the top 10 like we have been with our rebounding numbers.

Q. With last season being such a disappointment, what was the mood like when you were coming into the preseason and in Greece?

COACH LISA BLUDER: You know, this was an excellent time for us to have this international trip because we were able to put last year behind us and move on to the future. It couldn't have come at a better time for us with everybody returning and coming off of the year that we had, and I'll expect that we'll see great dividends from that trip because of that.

I always felt there's two ways to handle this opponent. One is to sit around and wallow in your self-pity, and the other is to use it as a motivation. Our team has used it as a motivation. They understand what it felt like to not make this postseason play last year. They are embarrassed for their university; they are embarrassed for our program and for the tradition of our program that we were not in postseason play last year, and they don't want to let it happen again.

Sometimes that can bring about some of the biggest changes is having something disappointing or bad happen to you in life; as long as you use it the right way, and I think our players have used it the right way.

Q. You have a lot promotions planned this year to bring fans to the games.

COACH LISA BLUDER: It's both and I'm really appreciative of our marketing efforts that we've had this year. I think that we've made a great effort in marketing our program in trying to bring people out to our basketball game and to support this basketball team.

One, I think we have a group of women that are worthy of support. Two, I think we are going to put a product on the floor that fans enjoy watching.

But you know, putting fans in the stands means a lot more than those two things. It means a lot to our players. Our players, when they come out of that tunnel, play just a little bit harder when

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there's a great crowd. You can't help that they are human beings, and when there's a great and excited crowd, it builds the excitement with them. And when you're tired at the end of the game, a tremendous crowd can definitely push you over that hump of being exhausted.

So, I think great crowds can help you win games. Also, it can help you win recruits. When we bring recruits into Carver-Hawkeye Arena and we have a positive, excited environment that we can show them, they want to be a part of it. So a good crowd and good fan base can do a lot of things for us.

Q. You are the dean of college coaches. Talk about the number of coaching changes in the Big Ten this past off season.

COACH LISA BLUDER: Well, it's unusual, the turnover we've had in our conference lately because we've had some people in this conference that had tremendous women's basketball experience and longevity. When you've got those people that have been around maybe that long, it's probably to be expected and we are talking people that are -- Rene, what was it, 27 years at Penn State, that's a long, long time.

It's going to be a great conference and we have great, great coaches in this league. And I think the four additions that we made will do nothing but help our conference, as well.

Q. And a Former Hawkeye is coaching at Illinois.

COACH LISA BLUDER: Very excited to have Jollette Law back in the league. Obviously, she had a tremendous playing career here, had a great coaching career underneath Vivian over at Rutgers, and I don't know, I think she still has a big place in her heart for the Hawkeyes.

Q. Will Kachine be able to step in and contribute this year?

COACH LISA BLUDER: That's definitely one of the reasons why we recruited Kachine; that, and she's got a great PA name. I mean who wouldn't want to be called 'Kash' over the PA? That's just a wonderful nickname and great PA name.

So, she brings about -- Kash is quick. She's athletic. She loves to play defense and she's a competitor. She's a kid when I watched her playing AAU basketball, she would be flying into the stands trying to save basketballs, and I

love the way she played the game. And I think the fans are going to love the way that Kash plays the game, and that's definitely one of the reasons we recruited her; and you can see from what our emphasis is this year that she fits into that emphasis pretty darned well.

Q. You mentioned the defense, does that mean full-court -- inaudible?

COACH LISA BLUDER: It could, although that's never been something I've hung my hat on. I believe in having a great quarter-court defense and half court defense, and once you get that down, then we can move it out.

But it's something that we've used, full court pressure more by surprise, out of a dead ball, out of a free throw; but it's not been something that we've done for 40 minutes, and I don't see us changing and becoming a 40-minute, full-court pressing basketball team.

Q. (Regarding who the starters will be).

COACH LISA BLUDER: Oh, I'm going to give you the old coaching answer: They are all open, because my players might read this tomorrow. (Laughing) So I'm always going to have that carrot over their head until the day before our first big game, and that's the way it should be.

Really, I want it to be a wide-open race, and I'm sure that for the people that started last year, they feel like they have a pretty good opportunity to start again this year. But I think they also look around and see there's a few more people that are trying to get their starting positions, as well.

And again, you know, starting is great, but as we all know, it takes much more than those five players. It takes a whole team to win basketball games, and sometimes those players coming off the bench -- I mean, if it only took five, we would have been fine last year, but it took more than that and we didn't have the next five. This year, we have the next five and that's what's going to make us a better basketball team and have to continue to remind them of that.

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