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An Interview With:

COACH BLUDER

COACH BLUDER: Well, it almost feels like one season is put to rest and here we start another season. I feel like we did a really good job in the non-Conference season, finishing 12-1, our one loss being to a ranked opponent. And I feel like we have prepared ourselves well. We have played on the road; we have played against athletic teams; we've played against fast teams.

Now the proof is in the pudding kind of and we'll see what happens.

We're starting out on the road in the Big Ten, against Penn State. To me this is one of those games that we lost there last year, but boy, it would really start us off on a good note to get a road win in the Big Ten against a team that's picked to finish somewhere in the middle of the Big Ten.

So to me that's an important game. I know we have 16 games, and every game that we are going to play, I'm always going to say is the most important game. The next game is always the most important. But when I look at the schedule, I feel like this one is key for us. Because again, it's a road game and it's against a team that's supposed to finish in the mid-range of the Big Ten Conference.

So if you want to finish at the top of the conference, these are the road wins you've got to win. And then we obviously come home and host Michigan, a team that beat us on our home court last year. We only play them once this year, so it would be really nice in these single-opponent games, you want to be able to beat them in case you end up in a tie, it goes to head-to-head competition. So it's an important game.

And also, we are undefeated on our home court. I think we have won 12 in a row on our

home court now. So for us, we really want to have that dominance at home, and that begins with the Michigan game as well.

So, big week for us. Everybody is back from Christmas holiday, everybody -- Hannah did well with her ankle, so she's full go for the game. So that's encouraging after her sprain against UNI. And we are just really excited to play against Penn State. I can't believe how many points they are putting up. They are averaging 85 points a game. That's going to be the best in the Big Ten; it could be the best in the country.

They are shooting the ball extremely well, 44 percent from three-point range; 46 percent from two-point range; their leading scorer comes off the bench, she's a freshman and this is a really big challenge for us, but I just feel really good after our last two practices. They have been very upbeat. The team seems very confident and ready to start Big Ten play.

Q. Penn State, they have played very well in the non-conference, shooting lights-out.

COACH BLUDER: I can't believe their scoring, averaging 85 points a game. We have not hit 85, one time, against Central Michigan? But they are averaging that. That is amazing, amazing numbers.

No, I don't think they played the competition that we have played. And so hopefully we have prepared ourselves better. But, yes, they are a team that is amazing offensively.

Q. Looks like you have a lot of kids in play --

COACH BLUDER: Yeah, I always think it's a little bit hard to slow down even a 30-second shot clock. By the time you get the ball off the court, anyway, you're talking 20 seconds to really run an offense. So maybe you can take three or four seconds off before you really start running your offense. But I think it's hard to slow it down,

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Coach Bluder 12 28 10 (2)

when you have a 30-second shot clock.

And I mean, the only thing is, if you get an offensive rebound, making sure you always pull it out to make sure you reset your offense versus looking at a quick shot off of an offensive rebound or an open three on a transition, maybe pulling that back.

Q. (No mic).

COACH BLUDER: I think that one of their attributes is their speed. I don't know how much we are going to be able to push it.

And I think one of the things we have to really, really concentrate on is transition. I mean, they are really -- we score 85 points a game; I guess you're a good transition team, most likely. They are. They are a very good transition team. I think they are one of, if not the best team in the Big Ten.

Q. What do you see, just from the non-conference teams, what does the Big Ten look like to you?

COACH BLUDER: I mean, throw in there Purdue and Northwestern, I mean, everybody just seems like they are playing very, very well. I have not seen where our conference is ranked in the country but it has to be right up there.

And it just seems like -- and now Purdue is getting healthier again. There's a lot of teams playing really good basketball in the Big Ten right now.

I haven't watched all of them. The only one I've seen actually is Penn State. That's the only Big Ten opponent I've watched on film.

Q. Minus the two games, is that more important to you guys --

COACH BLUDER: Yeah, I think it is. I think if you want to be the top, there's less room for error; you only have 16 games. I do think it was a good decision by the coaches to go to 16 games versus 18 games, because we always started out after the non-conference season, our RPI, conference RPI, was very high.

We play 18 games, we beat up on each other, get those extra losses because somebody has got lose when you're playing against each other, and our RPI would drop down and we would maybe not have as many teams in the Dance.

We are hoping that everybody scheduled well in those two games and hopefully picked up two wins, that automatically -- some of those are going to have to be losses playing against each

other so. We hope it helps the RPI. That was a long answer.

But that's what we did behind that. You know, you're just beating up on each other. We know each other so well; so when we play against each other, we can expose some things that other teams usually can't.

Q. The Big Ten doing so well, heading into the Conference challenge, how much does that help?

COACH BLUDER: I do think it's going to help. We won more than we lost. We would not have been able to do that if we were playing head-to-head competition. And so it's going to help us. Plus, you're playing against good competition, teams that have good RPIs and are going to continue to have good RPIs for the rest of the year, and I think that's going to help. And that was one of the things the administrators asked to us do, giving up the two games that we have the Big Ten/Big 12 Challenge.

Q. Starting last year with the youth that you had and then the injuries and where they are now, how much have those girls grown in the last year and how much more are they ready for the Big Ten, now that they have one under their belts?

COACH BLUDER: There's no comparison, you can't even compare where we were a year ago because of the experience level and how many freshmen we were playing, and Kash was just coming back at this point a year ago.

So now, we are healthy, knock-on-wood. And, every player that is playing for us has been in that Big Ten arena; has played in that Big Ten Tournament. So, every player that's playing considerable amount of time has played in the NCAA Tournament for us.

So I just don't think that experience, I just think it's so important, and we didn't have it last year. Does that guarantee us success? No. But I think it gives us an upper hand.

Q. Could you give us a timetable on when you will make a decision on Trisha?

COACH BLUDER: You know, Trisha, she's starting to do things in practice. She's doing all of the shooting drills. She's doing about half of the defensive drills now. She's not scrimmaging

yet. But she can't play in a game after January 2. That is the point where if you play in a game after January 2, you lose the redshirt opportunity to apply for a medical redshirt. So we have got to be really smart in our evaluation of her.

I definitely think Trisha can help us win games. Now, it really becomes, okay, what chance do we have of losing her. The worst thing that happens is she comes back, she plays a couple of games and re-tears it and she's out for the year; and we lose the year, so we don't get her, or the year.

And unfortunately, there's no medical person that wants to tell me: Oh, this is a 90 percent chance she's going to make it through the year, or there's a ten percent chance she's going to make it through the year. And I don't blame them; I wouldn't want to make that decision, either. But it would make it a lot easier on us if we knew some kind of percentages. It comes down to a gut feel us really talking with her to see what she wants to do. I want her to be a part of this decision.

Q. Do you care which class she ends up in?

COACH BLUDER: Sometimes you try to predict those things and then you get an injury here or a transfer. Hope that never happens with us, but it does. So trying to predict those classes is really tough. I think you predict them, you know, when are they are coming in as to who you go after, but trying to predict I think becomes pretty tough.

Q. Without Trisha, is depth a concern?

COACH BLUDER: Yes, it really is. You know, with losing Sierra, it's a blow to our wing position. And we are fortunate; we have Jaime Printy that can very comfortably handle the point guard, because she played it for four years in a high school. But had you asked Jaime which one she would rather play, she would say off-guard even though she has -- more of her lifetime, she's played the point guard.

So having Trisha back; and also, on the defensive side of things, having five more fouls; being able to rest people a little bit more; I think she'd really be an asset for us to have back.

Q. Is it a combination she's healthy and knowing the system and the players a lot better that she seems to be playing with more confidence?

COACH BLUDER: Kalli or Kelly? Sometimes it's hard to differentiate between the two names.

No, I think Kalli is getting healthier and that's helping us. I just think Kalli has real potential to help us. She's a big kid. She's a good size. She's strong. She's got a three-point shot. She's a good passer. I feel like Kalli can really help us and I think us coaches have done a much better job in the last couple of games of getting her in the game during important minutes and getting her more comfortable out there.

Q. Is she playing three or the four -- do you want her to play both?

COACH BLUDER: She can play both.

Q. The last couple of years you had a big charge at the end, how do you handle the expectations that you started hot, and going into the Big Ten season?

COACH BLUDER: We definitely don't want to have that trend again this year. We would like to continue what we have been doing, and playing well all the way through.

If you want to be a Big Ten champion, that's what you have to do. It's really hard to make up ground; especially like Jeff said, we're playing only 16 games this year. There's less opportunity to make up if you get way behind, too.

So, no, we definitely want to start out the season, that's what we talk about going into this game, how important this game is, just starting out in the right foot. We know it's tough going in there to play at Penn State.

Q. How many wins do you think it will take to win the Big Ten?

COACH BLUDER: The conference? I haven't even thought about that. Yeah, you know, the safe bet is 16. Is that a coward's way out? (Laughing). But I really haven't thought about it.

You know, I think just looking at who we are playing this year, you know, a safe scenario would be 12 or 13. I think it's going to take that to win it.

Q. You have a lot of experience, even though you have one senior starter, is it easier to have the team focus on the one-game-at-a-time mentality rather than the future?

COACH BLUDER: Yeah, I think as coaches, that's one of our jobs is you've got to educate them. You've got to really train them into thinking one game at a time, and that this next game is the most important game that you're playing.

With the Big Ten, I think it's improved so much; there are no games off. You used to be able to count and kind of be able to circle, okay, this is going to be a W; this is going to be a W. And those days are over.

So I think that having, you know, Kachine and Kelsey, who have been around that, helps. Even yesterday before practice we said to them: What do we want to tell the newcomers about playing at Penn State? What do they need to know that is different, that they are not maybe going to be ready for. And luckily, we only had two newcomers this year. But our freshmen were so young when they played there, I'm sure last year they don't even remember playing at Penn State.

Q. Do you think Ohio State is the front runner?

COACH BLUDER: I do. I think Ohio State is definitely the leader in the Big Ten right now, but Michigan State looks like they are playing very good basketball. They have had two really good top-25 wins in the non-Conference, and I think -- I know one, I know Florida State was on the road. I can't remember if -- was that on the road or at home? I can't remember. So I think they are playing some pretty good basketball, as well.

Q. How much do you talk to them about just making sure they consistently make the right decisions?

COACH BLUDER: You know, it's not just because what's happened in the news of the football team that we talk about those things. We honestly talk about those things all the time with our team.

As a general expectation of the team, our first team meeting in the fall, we begin with what our expectations are of our team and our values for our team are listed in our locker room, and they see them every single day when they walk in. We have even given them a quiz on the values of our team.

So I think that is a continual process. It's not like put the fire out when something bad happens. I think you've got to keep the grass wet all the time with that. I think you've got to stop any fire before it happens.



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I feel like that's something our team really understands and I'm fortunate that they really buy in. Our team really wants to be a role model. They want to have the respect of the other people in our community, because they are good people. And they genuinely are.

Q. Did you get a nice little break for Christmas? That had to really energize the players.

COACH BLUDER: They came back great, they really did. They came back very energized. I mean, last night's practice was really good, today's was, as well. But last night's -- they were excited to be back. Don't you love that? You love it when your team is really excited to get back on the floor instead of, like, oh, my friends are home on break and my family is home on break and I'm here. That's not the mentality at all.

Q. Can you get more out of your bench now?

COACH BLUDER: I'd like to see us score more points with our bench. Definitely I think that would be helpful for us, is to get a little more offensive production out of our bench.

Q. Who would you like to see -

COACH BLUDER: I think Hannah, Kelsey and Kalli are definitely candidates in that area.

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