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An Interview With:

GARY BLAIR

PETER IRWIN: Coach Gary Blair from Texas A&M University. Coach, welcome.

GARY BLAIR: Welcome. Good to be here. I would really like to invite all the media to Joni James's reception that she's going to have for everybody when she gets married. It's going to be an open bar, Joni James, we accept full accommodations, don't go cheap, we want the full bar, and congratulations, Joni.

It's good to be in Kansas City. As we were coming in the airport, I was telling my kids, probably the biggest highlight of my coaching career is when we made the Final Four in '98. And we left the West Coast, got there Tuesday, back home to Fayetteville and you had to come up here on Wednesday, got in here about 4 o'clock, and we flew into that airport there and as soon as we came in we saw the big billboard, welcome to the Final Four. So Kansas City has always been fond memories for me. It's a great city. My wife got her doctorate up here when we were at Fayetteville, coming for the medicine center here. Kansas City is a great town. We're glad to be here. Hopefully next spring we can stay a little bit longer than we did against Tennessee when we played them in the Final Four. That didn't last long. I'm glad to be here. I've never seen a green Kansas City hat, but that's good.

Q. Gary, what factors have to come together for this team to get you to another Final Four?

GARY BLAIR: Wow, health. We've got the kids. We're not very healthy right now. We've got a lot of kids that are banged up right now for the first time that I can remember in 10 or 15 years. We've got to get healthy and we've got to stay hungry. We will not be the sleeper that's coming up. People would look at us last year, some of our opponents and say, yeah, they play good

hard-nosed defense, but who's going to get 20 and 10 from them each night. We didn't know who was going to get 20 and 10 because we pass that torch around. That's what our team is made up of. Our leading scorer averaged 14, and it's probably going to be the same this year. We've got our top six back, almost our top ten back. We've got three very good recruits coming in, two guards, one from the Kansas City area, Tyra White, who we're expecting a lot out of this year. And it's nice to be the hunted for once. Oklahoma had that for the last couple of years. And in one way they're still the hunted. When you have Courtney Paris, I think all roads lead to Norman. But you've got to come through College Station first. I think that's going to be fun.

Can we live up to all the hype and expectations? Can we put bodies in the seat now without having to do gimmicks? Can they stand up and pay their money at the window and say we want to see quality, we want to see a top ten basketball team, are they for real? Hopefully we can live up to it. This is what we're in coaching for. I'm tired of being Cinderella. I'm the oldest Cinderella there is, and so we'll relish it at the top. Now what we've got to do is try to live up to it. But you're living up to it in the hardest conference, top to bottom, in the country. 1 through 12, no one can compete with what we have.

Q. Talk about having a bull's eye on his back, but what was it like in the offseason, through the offseasons you've had in the past, to where this offseason, being Big 12 champs and being able to say that and tell kids that, how much of a difference does that make?

GARY BLAIR: It was huge, particularly in the national scene. We were able to get in certain homes or threes when we would say who we were on the phone, they automatically said, hey, I saw you play Oklahoma. I saw you play George Washington or Baylor or Texas or somebody, and so television helps out a lot, but this conference helps out a lot. Because in the midwest and the southern part of the country, we lead the nation in

attendance. And we lead the nation probably in media exposure, and that's a tribute to you guys, and I think it's a tribute to what you're producing out there. We all have good marketing departments and I think our head coaches around this league, we sell ourselves pretty well. But it's a constant battle, because women's athletics, not just women's basketball will always be in the grass roots stage. We're growing and growing and growing and that's our job to keep it growing.

And what's so nice is when I look around here -- when I first started in this game and the college game at LA Tech, we were having fashion editors come cover us in New York. People that got stuck would draw the assignment of covering women's basketball. You are here because you want to be here, you didn't draw the short end of the stick, you drew the right end of the stick. And that's what's so good about our game. And of all the stories that you can write about our players, I encourage all of you to write more human interest stories about our young ladies in the conference, besides the negative stories of the won and loss. There's so many stories out there that need to be told. And you're the media that can do it.

Wearing this ring instead of my Arkansas Final Four ring for years, I just put it on yesterday. It's nice to come up here with a Big 12 championship ring. But I always told my kids I would always wear that Final Four ring at Arkansas until we won our own ring, here. I did the same thing when I left Stephen F., went to Arkansas, until we got our Final Four ring. I wore my Steven F same way from Louisiana Tech, I wore a national championship ring until we got a Sweet 16 ring from Stephen F.

During the summer when I got to the golf course, there wasn't a damn friend of mine that recognized anything, I still had to give up scores on almost every match I played. We're opening up in his hometown, and my hometown November the 9th. Folks, our first three games we're playing the No. 5 team in the world, the Chinese National Team, that has a number of WNBA players and then we're playing SMU in Dallas on November the 9th, and it's their best team since 2000, and Rhonda has really worked hard to get that team up. Then we come back on Sunday and play the U.S. National Team. We'll get our lunch handed to us, but at the same time we're one of the 8 schools along with Baylor in our conference that's getting a chance to play the U.S. National Team. And that's tremendous for our conference. We're playing the best of the best.



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And if any of you all could get down to the game, I encourage you to do that. People don't realize that team is coming in will be the best team either in men or women's ball to ever play in either one of our two facilities, when you start playing the Olympic team. It's going to be great for us. We're going to enjoy that moment. I don't know what the score will be, but we're going to have fun playing.

Q. Can you talk about how your team is -- you don't have what I guess you'd say are superstar type players, you do have a lot of complimentary players, players with maybe superstar ability, but that's not necessarily how you play. How has that style worked for you over the course of your career?

GARY BLAIR: I think it works first with your assistant coaches on who you hire. Can they teach the game and coach the game, not just recruit the game? And I think that's where too many staffs fall short on. We develop kids. And I think that's the strength of our program. That's why we're getting a lot of the kids that we're getting because you go back and you look at what we start with, they might not be a top ten player in the country, but all of a sudden we're doing a good job of developing what we have. Kids don't leave our program, they stay. They graduate. And I think that's important.

Now like when you look at a Tennessee and a Connecticut for the 08 recruiting class, if you keep up with the website, they committed 8 out of the top 15 in the country between those two programs. That sort of gets old, but at the same time my little band that I've got and we're going to play super hard, and if you think a Mulkey is going to back down to a Tennessee or a Sherri Coale is going to back down to a Connecticut or something, it isn't going to happen. This league plays hard. And we'll stand up to anybody. Of course Oklahoma has got the premier player in the nation this year, probably in Courtney Paris. Probably it will be her, Candace Parker or Sylvia Fowles, but each of those three can be defended. That's what you have to do. You have to build your team around defense first, and that's what we did. Even though every player on our team was recruited for their offensive ability, we teach them how to play defense early. And that's how you get playing time for us, defense, and we could become a better rebounding team and get a little more inside scoring this year, I think will improve. You've got

to, your same kids are back.

Let me ask the media a question. I got my journalism thing at Texas Tech, so I get the right to ask a question. Where do you see the growth in women's basketball? What is it going to take for us to go to that next level? Is it separate weekends for our Final Four? Is it separate weekends for our conference tournament? Where do you see the growth of this game going? How much better can it get? I'd love to hear that answer so I can say it on TV in the next room. Anybody got the answer?

Q. I don't know. We went from 8 sites to 16 sites?

GARY BLAIR: The 8 sites was horrible.

We played in front of I think 250 family and friends at the first game against our sister, Texas Arlington, and then we played in front of George Washington in front of about 550, no matter what they announced on attendance. But everything else about the tournament was well run. You felt like you were making a movie and you had to get to the theaters to see it or to the television, because nobody was there.

Q. More money is being pumped into the sport than ever before.

GARY BLAIR: It's being pumped into the sport, but we're growing as far as attendance. We've got a better chance of growth, just think of where soccer was years ago, look at soccer today, we're hosting the national championship there this year, we had 5,500 there Friday night and then we had 12,800 for Maroon Madness and Soulja Boy. I'm a Soulja coach. To see a 16-year-old piper just holding the crowd. As coaches we'd love to do that, but he could hold the crowd.

Q. I think until the West Coast sites prove they can draw, the NCAA tries to do the egalitarian thing, how about spreading it to the places that are proven draws? Until other places -- they might pony up the money, but they don't deliver the crowd.

GARY BLAIR: I think you've only got three places in the west that could ever draw, that has ever shown they can draw and that's Stanford, Washington and New Mexico and possibly we could get Arizona State on that map, to me that's it. And it wouldn't be fair to the rest of us, if we're always at those same four sites all the time. Hopefully we'll keep growing.

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