

# Michigan State Women's Basketball Media Day Press Conference

Monday, October 23, 2017

## Head Coach Suzy Merchant Transcript

**SUZY MERCHANT:** Appreciate you all being here. We're excited about this team. Some of you were there I think on Friday night, so you got a little idea about what product we have to put out there.

I'm really excited about this team, this program, the kids we have in it, our ability to play a lot of different ways this year. I think we're big, we're fast, we're strong, we're athletic, we're deep. Those are all great qualities to have in a team.

We have four starters back off the last year's team. We have 19 years of experience in our senior class. We added a McDonald's All-American, a top-five recruit in the country, as well as a lot of people don't know about Shay Colley, who sat out last year, a transfer from South Carolina. We're really excited about what we have coming back, what we have coming in.

It's just going to be a really, really exciting year. I think sometimes when you lose prolific scorers and prolific players like an Aerial (Powers) and Tori (Jankoska), sometimes people put a lot of stake into one person. As good as they were here at Michigan State, I think this team top to bottom is as deep and athletic and good and talented as we've ever had. I'm excited about that.

I think as you go through this so many years, it's always interesting to kind of see the national perspective of different things and when kids graduate. I'm excited about this team, very excited about this team. I think you guys will be, too, when you watch us play.

Having said that, I'll take questions.

### **Q. Talk about Taryn (McCutcheon).**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** She played extensive minutes last year. I just think that kid is probably, when you look at her minutes and experience that she's had to play, she's probably going into her junior year, maybe late junior year in terms of what she can bring to this team.

She'll have some help this year with Shay (Colley). They'll be able to play a couple different positions. I always appreciate and love players like Taryn because their actions speak louder sometimes than their words. Even though sometimes I try to get her speak more and be vocal, don't get me wrong, but I would take a kid any day of the week that plays hard, that plays with that kind of toughness, then kind of build in the verbal piece versus the other way around.

### **Q. Looking at this new team, what kind of mark did Tori (Jankoska) set on this team for its character?**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** Tori, she was a big-shot kid. The other thing I think, she wanted the ball in her hands. I think people realize that has to be emulated. Somebody has to take the shot this year, got to be the go-to person. That kid also brought a lot of work ethic and confidence to our program. She was in the gym all the time working on her game. That usually translates into success, right? Work, success, kind of goes hand-in-hand.

The other thing is her confidence. She had a swagger about her. I always say there's a fine line between cockiness and confidence. Sometimes Tori walked it a little bit. I thought last year was as good of a senior year as I've seen anybody ever have in the history of me coaching for 23 years.

### **Q. You've had some really good inside players before, with Sidney (Cooks), Taya (Reimer), they have range, too. Are you more excited about your front court than other years past?**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** I am. Those kids, they worked really hard to get in better shape, too, to be honest. That was a little bit of our problem. We had some injuries last year, so some of those kids weren't in the best shape they could be. Jenna (Allen) had her whole front teeth knocked out, Taya was coming off of ankle injury.

In terms of our post play, I think it's as skilled and athletic and as big as we've ever had. They're real versatile. Taya has been playing some three for us a little bit as a 6'4" three man on the women's side. She's skilled enough to be able to do that. She's a good passer.

This group of posts, we can really do some interesting things. They can really pick and pop, stretch defenses. We can load them up inside, put their back to the basket, put people on the basket, too. I'm really excited about the depth there and the versatility.

**Q. Big tests early.**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** I think our non-conference has seven teams that played in the post-season NCAA tournament. We're really excited about playing in the Phil Knight, the PK 80 games. Only four women's teams in the country that were invited in the country to play that. There's eight men's teams. It's going to be a crazy event, I think, because there's a lot going on. I think it's going to be a lot of fun for our players to be showcased in something as prolific as that.

UConn, they're the best in the business, as they say. They come at you, they're fast, play at a high level. We're excited about the challenge. If you can test yourself early with a UConn and then have to go on the road in the environment at Notre Dame, you're going to find out where you're at, things you have to improve on for the Big Ten season, to win a Big Ten title.

**Q. Because both Aerial and Tori were such strong personalities, can you talk about leadership with this group, maybe who takes the lead on that. Also, can you talk about how maybe your approach changes with not having Aerial and Tori, having more to work with.**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** Yeah, I mean, I think this team has a lot of personality. It's probably the most personality I've ever had on a team. I think they bring a lot of energy and passion, enthusiasm for the game. But they're really fun to be around. They really genuinely like each other. They have a lot of fun together. I think that's important.

I've really seen Lexi (Gussert) step up the most. She's one of our captains. Although maybe her stats don't really show that she's been a prolific player for us, she's an incredibly important piece to this whole season. She's coming off a great summer. I think I saw at Midnight Madness, she was knocking down things. We're trying to put her in a role where less is more.

The thing about Lexi is there's nobody that loves being a Spartan more than her. That fit Tori and Aerial, too. I think when you had a leader that believed in the way they did, that enthusiasm permeates for everybody.

She's a very engaging kid. She can reach everybody in her own way. I'm excited about her, the way she's kind of carried herself in terms of being a vocal leader, and obviously the basketball piece, too.

I think Taya brings a lot of experience. I don't know if you guys will ask her, but I don't think she was satisfied with what happened to her last year. She just wasn't in the best of shape. I think she was disappointed in how she played.

She's extremely motivated. It's been fun to watch her this off-season, really challenge herself. She's just getting better and better.

I think those two kids. You throw in Jenna Allen, who is a little different kind of leader. She's kind of a glue kid. It's fun. It might be a little bit more of a committee when you don't have as dominant of a personality, but you have a lot of them with it.

My big thing is as long as we got a bunch of relentless competitors, we're going to be all right. That's what Aerial was, Tori, and the team I have. I feel confident in that department.

**Q. How much did Tori rub off on Lexi? Do you see her having a similar senior season as other players?**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** I think so. She's someone that really gets it. She was talking to me the other day about how much this place means to her. She's really taking in every moment. She doesn't want it to end. That's a pretty special thing.

I mean, I think sometimes the grind of college basketball, some kids kind of get closer to their senior year, they think about what's next. She's not. She's hanging on. She really wants to enjoy everything from a Media Day to a recruit visit to a football game. You name it, she is completely embracing what's going on.

Will I be surprised if that kid has the best senior year of her career? No, I won't. She's put the work in. I think she's really, really invested in being in the moment.

**Q. You mentioned Shay already. A lot of people probably forgot she had to sit out last season. What do you expect from her? How valuable is it for a player to sit on the bench for a year?**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** I think when you play the position she's played, she's more of a point guard that can play the two. A little bit different than what Tori was. But she can do both.

I think when you sit there and you play those positions, you can really see the game in a different way. You get to travel, understand the league, all that kind of stuff.

I think the biggest thing that Shay will bring is the defensive side of the ball. I don't know if I've coached a kid as good as she

is. It has nothing to do with me. That kid, I'm glad she's here because I'm a defensive coach. At the end of the day, her ability to guard the ball, be in the right place, understand what is going on around on the defensive end is as good as I've ever had.

**Q. Talk about the impact you expect Sidney to have on the team right away.**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** I mean, she's talented. She's a true stretch four man at 6'4". She can block shots. I think she brings a lot of feistiness, competitiveness. She really understands the game. I've been really impressed with her IQ for the game in terms of how quickly she's picked up.

We have recruits at practice. I think the number one thing that high school kids see when they come to college or come to college practice is the pace. Everybody is bigger, faster, stronger, but the pace.

Sid has really picked everything up extremely well. She's a multi-position kid, for sure. Right now I've sort of locked her into the four so she can build her natural position, we'll build her out from there in years future.

I'm really excited about her and what she brings. I think she's a talented young lady. Certainly she has things to work on, like everybody. But she's going to be fun for our fan base to watch, for sure.

**Q. You've obviously dealt with young players in the past. Without having the 'second coach' there in Tori on the floor, are you ready to a little bit more frustrating of a year, more of a challenge as a coach?**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** You're a Tori fan (laughter). I like her a lot, too. There's no question.

I always said that about her. I know Shelley (Appelbaum) is here. I always say she should be sitting in my chair someday. If Michigan State knew what was good for them in about 15, 20 years from now, that kid would be running this program. I don't say that too often about kids. Her IQ was definitely off the charts.

I was just telling someone the other day about Tori. They were asking a question about her. I said, I can specifically remember in four years, there's two specific plays. We played Syracuse on the road in Orlando. We ended up beating them the year before they went to the national championship game.

She said, Coach, let's run the bounce play, three low. Then the Ohio State game here went in triple overtime, when Hines put that kid in the basket, had 36 that night. We ran our sideline out-of-bounds play that we have run for years. Those were kind of her two calls. They helped us win games, no question about it.

I mean, I'll miss her. I'm not sure anybody on the court really will emulate that. But she was just a unique kid when it came to that. I mean, she is a special player, but she also has a tremendous understanding of how people defend, what they're doing, that kind of thing.

Someone will step up. I pay some people pretty good money to coach. I should get some other suggestions, too, on the bench. I'll say that.

**Q. With the decision by Branndais (Agee) to come back and play one more year, talk about what you've seen from her. All last year she sounded like she wasn't satisfied. Talk about her approach during the off-season.**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** Yeah, I mean, I think the thing with Branndais is she's had some injuries. I think she had a pin put in her foot, two ACLs. She had another foot injury going into the year, last year, going into Italy. She didn't play.

I think the one thing I'll say about Branndais is when she isn't in the best condition, she struggles to play at a high level. So I think she's really embraced that. She's had a healthy off-season. She understands how important that is.

The second piece to that I would say with Branndais is the kid has a dream to play in the WNBA and be drafted. I think as good as she is, when you look at our program, you have Aerial first, then Tori. Tori was kind of behind Aerial. Now that Tori has graduated, I think it's kind of a hierarchy a little bit. I think she's ready to put her stamp on the program, to kind of prove herself on a national level as well. The only way to do that is to come back.

I told her at the beginning of the year I thought she should come back for that reason. I didn't think she had a healthy off-season because she was hurt.

No, no, coach, I'm good.

Okay, come late December, early December, she's like, I want to come back, coach.

I'm like, Absolutely. Not a problem.

I was really excited to see her come back.

**Q. Looking at some of the video from Friday, when the Hall of History was unveiled, you could see the jubilation in your players' eyes with the improvements to the building. What do the renovations do for the program from a recruiting standpoint, but also more fans in the building?**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** For sure recruiting is how we all think first, right? I think it starts with the weight room downstairs. That's big-time. I'm sure you all have been down there to see that. That's sort of in the basement. A lot of people didn't see those bells and whistles, but that is an impressive place.

The fact we have a professional locker room for WNBA and NBA players, nobody else in the country I know of on the women's side has that. You add that into already what you saw with the Hall of History in Gilbert Pavilion. I just think it's really special and unique.

I actually had a mom in my office, had a bunch of recruits, like Izzo did up here. She said, You know what I like? I like that you can really tell that the women matter here. A lot of places, you go down and see things, there's a men's hallway and a women's hallway, everything is really separated. I was just so impressed that everything was interconnected.

That's what I just tried to say and appreciate and thank everybody that was involved in that, especially Coach Izzo. He doesn't have to do that. I grew up in this business. Trust me, I had some Division II and Division I people that were like, Wow, you're not that big-time. We can all just connect and help each other out here.

To come here and see a Hall of Famer know everyone on my team, come to my games, call me, check on me, meet with recruits, make sure we're included in that building. He didn't have to do any of that, really didn't. I'm just super proud to represent Michigan State because of some of the things he's accomplished.

**Q. What are your thoughts with the changes for the Big Ten's women's schedule?**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** I've always liked the rivalry thing. You grow up in this state especially, I think you should protect those. I mean, I didn't like the years that we only played them one time, it was either here or there, especially when it comes to Michigan. I think the Michigan-Michigan State rivalry is fun. Those are the games that kids love to play in, fans love to be part of. It makes sense that way, certainly.

With the addition of the Big Ten Network, too, I think a lot of fans and people want to see a connection with the league teams more than non-conference opponents at times. So it will be fun. It will be interesting to see. I know the men have moved to 20 games. What will happen with us, time will tell.

I am excited about the opportunity that they're going to protect those rivalry games. I think they're important.

**Q. You talked a lot about the versatility of all these players. Are you going to be toying with the lineup this season?**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** I think so. I mean, I think we're a very deep team. I think kids that can play multiple positions add a different opportunity for us. It's not like that every year, you don't always have that. I've always been a big fan of versatility anyway. I came up small college, mid-major. I couldn't go out, get McDonald's All-Americans, kids that could dunk, things like that. I legitimately had to play backwards sometimes. Guards that could post because they were tweeners. It's been nice to be able to build a team of size but at the same time a skill set where they can do a little bit of everything.

I'm looking forward to it. I'm looking forward to our guard play as well. I think we're pretty dynamic at the guard. We're big. I think having a team that you can put out there that you can adjust, people have to adjust to you, more than the other way around, I think is going to be fun.

**Q. Talk about the advantages of having three former players (Kalisha Keane, Jamine Hines, Annalise Pickrel) in your gym for practices, what that brings, the dynamic that helps with this team.**

**SUZY MERCHANT:** You always talk about family. When you have three kids come back to play for you, it just feels right, number one. Number two, those kids have won four Big Ten championships. Kal (Keane) is the only Big Ten Player of the Year at Michigan State to ever play. Then they've gone on professional so they see things differently.

They've done a really, really good job of investing in our team, the connection with the girls. Any time you can help explain a crazy head coach, it's not all bad. That's the way I look at it (laughter). They've been really good that way.

I'm really excited. Our players have really embraced all three of them. I'm thrilled to have them back. We always talk about Spartan family. Scott Westerman is here who does a great job with alums. When you can bring alums back and keep them around, it's super fun. It's going to be a great year, I feel it, really good year.