

UConn coach Dan Hurley breaks down the 2021-22 roster: 'Sometimes they play like five stars'

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David Borges

In an annual rite of fall that can only mean the college basketball season isn't far off, Dan Hurley addressed the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday morning and provided an outlook on the UConn men's basketball team.

In the event, held virtually for a second year in a row, Hurley told the invited guests that his year's Huskies have "championship aspirations," and while happy to be ranked No. 24 in the preseason AP Top 25 poll, noted that the goal is to be in the Top 10 or 15.

Hurley, in his fourth season as the Huskies' coach, was asked about his freshman class of four, four-star recruits.

"Sometimes they play like five stars," he reported, "and sometimes they play like three stars. So, it comes out to a four."

Asked about some of his influences in the college coaching world, Hurley noted that he's largely "self-made in the business," in that he didn't come up through the ranks as a college assistant but, rather, spent 10 years coaching Saint Benedict's Prep in New Jersey before landing his first college coaching job. He did mention his older brother, Bobby (Arizona State), as well as Nate Oats (Alabama), Bashir Mason (Wagner) and David Cox (Rhode Island) as people he's coached with whom he still communicates with frequently, along with some retired coaches - Seth Greenberg, Fran Fraschilla and, of course, his father, Bob Sr., the Hall of Fame former St. Anthony's High coach.

"Most of us coaches are paranoid," Hurley reasoned. "We trust very few people with our information."

Hurley also went down his 2021-22 roster and commented on each player. Here are his expectations from each player:

Isaiah Whaley: "For us to take the next step as a program, we need him to make 3's and be a player that the other team has to respect. Especially when he plays the four next to Adama Sanogo. Because the court shrinks if we don't have a perimeter scoring threat ... He shoots the ball well. He needs to take his shooting from practice over to game night."

Tyler Polley: "We think we're gonna get a better version of Tyler this year. That second year back from ACL surgery, players all see a spike in their play. His length, size and versatility as a defender make him valuable. We need more from him on the backboard, more production

across the board. Maybe a steal or two a game, even better defensively, maybe helping us on the backboard more, where he hasn't always helped as a guy who's 6-9. And he's a potential 1,000-point scorer at UConn, and I know he's highly-motivated to reach that goal."

R.J. Cole: "Being in the backcourt with James (Bouknight) forced R.J., in some sense, to be a little more of a game manager. Maybe he didn't play to all his aggressiveness and abilities as an offensive player. He's gonna have a lot more of a green light this year to hunt his offense, to shoot his shots, to make his plays and be very aggressive and offensive minded. We need him to go from 12 (points) and 4 (assists per game) to 15 and 5.6, 6 assists for us to get where we need to get to. He's got to be a team leader, along with Isaiah."

Tyrese Martin: "Critical guy. His shooting numbers, up until a late-season swoon, he was having a great year for us. We need that consistency all the way through the year. He's having a really good preseason, had a really good summer. We need him to be that third scorer, an all-conference level player. He's a two-way player, really helps you on the backboards. If he can just consistently finish around the rim and shoot the high-30's from 3, he's a top player in the Big East."

Richie Springs: "He's really matured and developed a lot. He's obviously in an incredibly competitive situation to get on the floor. He's the type of guy we'd be comfortable playing because he knows our system. He's a hell of a rebounder."

Jalen Gaffney: "We know that he's a good and really valuable player, and he's going to play a big role. How big of a role will be determined over the next few weeks. He brings an invaluable ability to create off the dribble. As a junior, you hope he takes the next step."

Akok Akok: "The best he's looked for us so far in the preseason in an intrasquad scrimmage at XL Center with referees the other day. He looked good, made a 3, finished around the rim."

Andre Jackson: "He has a chance to be, if he locks in on it, an elite perimeter defender, one of the best in the country. He's shooting the ball better than he's ever shot the ball. He's gonna have a huge impact on the season."

Adama Sanogo: "I'm not frequently wrong in seeing greatness in young players. He's so rare in how driven he is to succeed, how competitive he is, his work ethic ... he's shooting right now, and he's been down there since really early. We'll practice really early today, and when we leave here after staff meetings to go make recruiting calls, he'll be shooting."

Corey Foyd Jr.: "We're all amazed by him, the way he's been able to seamlessly jump into a Top 25-projected program. He's got two incredible parents, an incredible family, with a mindset coming in here - he's 17 years old, practicing against 22 years old. He's gonna be an outstanding player for us over the course of his career here. He reminds me of a guy I had at Rhode Island, Jared Terrell - a physically strong guard who impacted winning so much."

Rahsool Diggins: “He might’ve taken a (knee) bone bruise within the first practice or two, so he hasn’t really had a chance to do much with us. He showed flashes of his ability during the summer, but he hasn’t really been healthy since we’ve gotten into it in October. He’s got good size, physically very strong, really good skill level.”

Jordan Hawkins, Samson Johnson: “You look at them and project the next couple of recruiting classes in ‘23 and ‘24, because you just don’t think you’re gonna get a full four years with either of those guys. They have so many traits that project to the NBA from a skills standpoint. Jordan has a chance to make bigger impact sooner, because of what we lost on perimeter with James, as opposed to Samson. Don’t look to compare his play style to Bouknight. It’s not the same type of flair as a finisher. But in his own way, Jordan’s incredibly dynamic as a shooter. He’s got a chance to be one of the elite shooters in the country when it’s all said and done here. Going back to Ray and Rip, I don’t know that there’s a guy with better footwork. And Samson is what you would hope your stretch four man to look like. He’ll eventually be able to guard all five positions, eventually be a competent to good 3-point shooter. And the things he does above the rim, and his cutting are elite.”

Andrew Hurley: “I didn’t like his choice of music at First Night. I think it was Spice Girls? I didn’t love that for my son.”

Matt Garry: “He tore all the ligaments in his knee, as well as microfracture. Matt had the full brutality with the knee. We set a goal of dunking on First Night, and Matt was able to do that. So, the Pride of Southington ... great job.”

RIM RATTLINGS

Martin struggled late in the season with converting point-blank shots around the rim. He explained the genesis of his struggles at Tuesday’s Big East Media Day: “I felt like last year, being around bigger guys, I would rush my shot around the rim so it didn’t get blocked. This year, I’m not going to be rushing.”

Martin also noted that he ran a two-day camp in his hometown of Allentown, Pennsylvania in August that was free to underprivileged kids and \$50 for “out-of-city” kids. He said he wanted to do it to help his community. Thanks to the NCAA’s Name, Image and Likeness (NIL) legislation, Martin was able to make some money off the camp.

UConn will play a closed-door scrimmage on Saturday against Harvard, then play another against another Division 1 team on Oct. 30.

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