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Matt Campbell

Press Conference



Q. Matt, has anything changed regarding Rocco's status? Do you still expect him back sometime in the middle of the spring practice? And how will that affect your spring work?

MATT CAMPBELL: I think Rocco is a little bit ahead of schedule in terms of physically he was able to get out and do some drill work today, some individual.

I think the biggest thing for him is he won't get live reps, but I think things like 7-on-7, 3-over-2, routes on air, I think he's going to get a lot of that work, which will be really, really good for him. He's been throwing now for a little over three weeks, which has been really great for him.

It's just we've got to make sure we're slow and right with Rocco rather than fast and wrong. It's certainly huge to have him out there in individual and certainly huge to have him out even today in group and for those young quarterbacks to be able to watch him and just to have his leadership on the field. That's been big for us.

Q. I wanted to ask you about your wide receiver room. When you were at Iowa State, the production was always there. It was a team strength. That really hasn't been the case at Penn State the last couple of years. Just your thoughts on the room, how you guys have been consistently able to do that, and I wanted to ask you what led you to Kashif Moore as your wide receivers coach? I know you had to add him a little bit late in the process.

MATT CAMPBELL: I'll start off with Coach Moore, and then I'll work my way back to your first question. With Kashif, it was an interesting process, I'll be honest with you.

I think the one thing that I found as a head coach is it's really great to go through the interview process. Even sometimes when you think you may know who you want to hire, I think sometimes, when you go through the interview process and you get to hear the coaches be teachers, that's really big for me.

I guess I've always had a philosophical approach of how do you teach the room and how do you develop? We're coming from a background where development had to be the key to our success.

I think with Coach Moore his background as a player -- he was a captain on those great UConn teams, won the Orange Bowl his senior year as a captain -- I loved that. I loved his leadership ability.

I love his journey. He used his academic career. He started not in football after he got done playing in the NFL, not really coaching football. Used his degree in business and really was quite successful. Then found his love back for coaching and knew that he wanted to give back and was purposeful. It started at the high school level. Again, then he went to Division III level, and he kind of worked himself back to where he was at UConn.

I think, if you watch the production of his receivers, obviously the young man that's going to be a high draft pick for UConn stayed with Kashif, which I think says a lot in today's world, was a highly sought after young man after what he did as a junior and watch what he did as a senior, it was really impressive. I think he'll be a first, second round type draft pick. So you got to see some videotape evidence of his teaching as well.

I just think all those things fit, to me, of what we were looking for. And I think just who he is as a man, his wife, good father, and just what he's about, all those things were a great fit for us.

Then the recruiting room, if you look all the way back to our days at Toledo, we've always had great receivers because we've always known what we're looking for. We know what the X receiver has to be able to do. We know what a slot receiver has to have the ability to do. And we know what a Z receiver has got the ability to do. So I think we always look for those traits in the recruiting process and then know can we develop that young man into what we're looking for?

I think, if you look at even the sizes and the shapes of our guys for the last 12 years, X receivers have looked like



this, slot receivers have looked like this, Z receivers have looked like this, and they've had certain qualities. I think, when you know what you're looking for, it really helps the process be efficient.

Then obviously the quality and characteristics of what we've looked for in terms of the human being as well. So I think we're really excited about where that room is.

Again, no different than Rocco. You've got Chase and Brett, who we brought over from Iowa State, who had really productive years a year ago. I think, as you watched their season progress last year, those guys really made some really huge gains within the football season, and I think they were poised for year two within the system.

Both of those guys are coming off of injuries, so they're kind of in the same boat as Rocco is, kind of working back through spring practice. I don't think those guys will get live reps this spring, but can do some individual, can do some routes on air.

Then really some of the young guys we had at Iowa State, Karon Brookins is a super talent. We thought he was one of the really talented guys that was in our program at Iowa State a year ago. It just so happens we kind of brought him a little bit closer to home, and we're excited about what he's got the ability to do. Zay Robinson, a really talented young guy. Obviously Koby Howard, Koby got an opportunity to get in late in the season last year and did some really good things. We think really highly of him.

I just think that whole room in general has got great ability. They're young. They're going to have to grow up fast. Even the guys that have played, they're going to have to take another huge step forward if they're going to be the team we've got the ability to become.

Q. Coach, you talked back in February and you have here this morning as well about guys coming back from injury. How many -- if you can talk in a ballpark or general stance, how many guys do you have coming back, and how has that changed your plan compared to maybe past years?

MATT CAMPBELL: I don't know if it's much different compared to past years. At the end of the season, that's the world we live in. You're going to have injuries, and you're going to have guys coming back from season-ending injuries. Some of those are major. Some of those are just cleanup.

I think, again, from my end, slow and right with anybody coming off an injury is still priority number one. What can we get them into? I think the good thing about guys that

had season-ending injuries a year ago, at least they can start to do some things, and we have to create a practice that allows those guys to get reps, whether that's walk-through or run-through or whether that's individual how do we progress those guys forward where they can still grow in spring practice.

Then I think what it does is it gives a lot of other guys opportunities to get evaluated. So I don't ever look at it as a negative or a positive. It just is what it is, and it's one of those situations where we have to do a great job as the coaches of creating a learning environment for everybody to grow forward.

Has it changed this much? We certainly do have a lot of guys who will not be at least live reps in the spring, but that's no different than other years past where I've been. So you've just got to do a great job with the young men that you do have. You've got to be smart in how you practice and make sure everyone's getting what they need out of spring practice.

Again, that puts it on the head football coach to design the right practice, and it puts us as teachers, in terms of our assistant coaches, to make sure everybody is getting what they need to progress forward.

Q. Do you have an availability report beyond the guys you just mentioned, like Chase, Brett, and Rocco, specifically guys who will be out or limited this spring?

MATT CAMPBELL: I didn't bring it. Certainly any names that you would want to ask me, I'd be more than willing to share with you of who's going to be available. Obviously it's an open practice Thursday, so you're going to see who's limited or not.

I would say the thing that I know I am really confident in is everybody will be back full strength by the time -- as long as we do it right, and we'll see what happens in the spring -- but at this point everybody should be full go, ready to rock and roll by the time we get to fall camp.

Q. Penn State has a great history of defensive ends, big time pass rushers, No. 1 type guys. Do you believe you have the makings of that with this defense right now? What do you hope to accomplish in that vein during the spring?

MATT CAMPBELL: Number one, I would certainly say that it's been awesome for me to be able to go back through the years and really study the film from the previous seasons. The first thing I would say is you're 100 percent right. I mean, elite pass rushers and guys that were relentless to the quarterback.

I think one of the things that's exciting for us is there's some young guys here at Penn State that certainly have shown flashes of that. What Yvan has looked like as a young freshman last year in some big moments near the end of the season, I thought was no less than spectacular for a young guy -- you're talking about the Ohio State game and the Indiana game. His ability is as high as anybody we've coached, and I think he's got a huge upside in terms of what he's got the ability to do.

I got to watch a little bit of Max's opportunity, Max Granville, from where he was as a freshman. I know he got some huge opportunities in the playoffs and then was coming back from injury.

I think there's guys that have proven that, in at least some short amount of videotape evidence, they've got high ceilings. I think all of those are really great questions. Until you get out to practice, until we get to work through fall camp, spring football, where does that room really take off to?

I think we're really proud of what that room has got the ability to look like. I think, probably like some other rooms, there's some prove it guys, guys that have to grow forward, have to take some steps forward to be able to prove that they can play at the level of what the history of this program has looked like in terms of pass rush ability.

Q. With so many different people in the program now, how do you go about getting everybody on the same page? When you're in a program for five years, everybody knows what spring practice is about, what are the nuts and bolts like in these first few practices?

MATT CAMPBELL: That's a great question. I think it really is slow and right. To me I'm a -- I still believe like coaching is teaching, and teaching is the ability to inspire learning and the ability to every time you go out to practice or every time you go to a meeting, these are teaching opportunities.

I think it's really important to make sure that we provide the platform to be great teachers, whether that's a meeting, that's a walk-through, whether that's a practice.

I do think every year is still different in football, and there's -- especially with the turnover now in rosters from year to year and certainly sometimes coaching staffs, that I am a believer that you always start back over at square one and rebuild your way through it. I think, even as a head coach, you're always self-reflecting what went well, what didn't go well? How do we be better, and what does this team need?

I think every year, even in a spring practice setting, every year it's going to look a little different just based on where you're at. I don't think it's so foreign to me in terms of starting back over, but I do think aligning everybody, making sure we're slow and right right now. Where do drills go? Where does the offense go? Where does the defense go? All of those things are certainly unique and new. So slow and right is really the process for us.

Q. What has been the biggest adjustment for you so far as you get ready to go into spring ball from a personal standpoint as you kind of adjust to Penn State?

MATT CAMPBELL: Man, that's a good question. I still feel like in some ways it's been a whirlwind that you just kind of -- man, other than how did you get into the facility? Which took probably about two weeks to try to figure that out -- I just feel like you kind of hit the ground running and just the process it takes to build a football team year in and year out and build a football program, I don't think those things change.

I think the biggest thing is getting our families here, my own family, our coaching staffs' families, getting ourselves settled, that was the biggest process, and making sure everybody feels confident and comfortable coming into the facility every day ready to attack the opportunity we have.

It's been a whirlwind, but it's been a really great whirlwind, and I feel like we continue to push forward, which has been positive.

Q. I think about what you said to Mark's question, just about slow and right and how to handle spring practice with so much teaching, you're bringing a roster from a bunch of different places, guys who were here, Iowa State, the other transfers, young kids. How important are these practices to bring that group together, and what are your benchmarks of success when we get to the end of April at a spring game and you've got to say good-bye to these kids for a little bit too?

MATT CAMPBELL: I just think that the fun thing about college football -- and I've always thought of it this way -- is you really have three eight-week blocks to prepare for the journey of the season. I think each block has critical markers that you have to feel like you're gaining ground.

You know, that winter block is understanding the value of the habits it takes to be successful, thoroughly evaluating ourselves as coaches, but also evaluating the players and where are our gaps? I have to evaluate that as a head football coach if I'm going to ask our coaches and our

players to be willing to evaluate that.

Then I think you have to be relentlessly during that eight-week block trying to create championship habits before you even step on the field for spring practice. Then I think, as you're getting into spring practice as you're starting to develop a team, what are those things that we are going to measure ourselves by?

I think, again, it's continuing those championship habits, how I go to school every day, how I take care of nutrition, how I take care of my body, how I -- you know, how I show up in the weight room. Those things, we're still asking our players to do. But now how do I play the game of football, and what is our identity? What are we going to look like?

I still think, when I think of our football program, the values of being a tough team is important, mentally and physically tough. How are we going to define that? What does that look like in a practice every day? You get 15 opportunities to showcase that.

You talk about being a disciplined football team. I think that's critically important for us to be successful. Again, football practice has moments where we get to show and evaluate discipline, and I think that piece is really big.

Then I think the other piece of it that's huge is being together, being a team that's got -- you know, the great thing about spring practice is it never goes good. I hate to ruin it for anybody, but spring practice is somebody wins and loses, and the reality is we're all on the same team. That's individually, that's collectively, offense, defense.

So how do we handle success in a practice? How do we handle failure in a practice? Sometimes you want to create that as the coach because you want to see where are our gaps? Who's leading our football team through all those things?

I think to me beginning to create an identity for our football team of who are we going to become? I think that's what's fun because that identity does change, at least year in and year out, in terms of where your strengths lie or where your weaknesses are. But I hope by the time we get to spring we have a better understanding of where those gaps are in those areas and how we fill in those gaps during the summer and fall camp so we can be ready for the football season.

Q. You mentioned before that it's really important for these fans to see the team in Beaver Stadium before the fall. What are you guys planning for that 15th practice format-wise?

MATT CAMPBELL: I think it's twofold. Number one, I think it's really important for us and how critical our fan base is to our football program that we get out and have an opportunity for our fans to be with us, but I think equally it's critical for our players to be in that stadium and to feel what that fan base feels like and looks like and what Beaver Stadium looks like, replicating that environment to the best of our ability before we step in and play a game obviously next fall.

I think we'll evaluate exactly what that 15th practice looks like. I think you'll get some version of practice. Hopefully we can get some scrimmaging where we get some live reps in practice and be able to showcase that.

What we won't do is waste a day. What we will do is I think it's really important for us to be out there and make sure we do a great job of being there for our fans and equally being able to be with our fans because I think it's really important.

Does that answer it? Somewhat? Yeah.

Q. Philosophically, but also physiologically, why do you, not only winter workouts but spring and maybe fall, do a.m. workouts? And what are the ramifications academically for the student half of the student-athlete as far as their academic progress?

MATT CAMPBELL: It's a great question. It's an area for me that I've really become convicted on that it is absolutely the best thing for student-athletes. When we were in COVID at Iowa State, everything went online at Iowa State, so we became -- you know, I just felt like there was so much going on, that the best thing that we could give our players was us to start the day.

Equally, I thought the best thing that our players got was our opportunity to interact with them, and we got their best. As most bull-headed head coaches, that's not what we've always done. So we went back to normal in '21, and I went back to afternoon practice. We slipped academically, and we slipped with our production, and it was a major mistake on my end.

I think two years ago, three years ago now, we went to morning practices in the fall, and what I saw -- you're talking the last three semesters in the fall, which we always did afternoon in the spring and in the fall we did in the morning -- what we saw was our team GPA was around a 3.4 GPA the last three, full fall semesters.

I think it gives our young men a start to their day, which is huge. It gives them breakfast, gives them lunch after practice, and gives us a chance to reconnect with them with dinner so I could get their meals and how they eat. I

think we saw injuries significantly decrease because we had the opportunity, man, they're not sitting in class and their day didn't start slow. Everybody's day starts the same, and it starts with breakfast, it starts with the opportunity to be in an engaging environment. I think what we got with it is academically you saw everything skyrocket.

I'm really excited to continue that. I think already our guys have come up and said, man, I really love this morning block. We did it this spring just to make sure we could work out the kinks for the fall, but I think those things are really big. It gives us the ability to really have a great rhythm to our day, and it gives us the ability to start the day right.

I think the other thing, once you get in the season, by the time Thursday you get off the field, our guys physically can be their best by the time they get back on the field on Saturday, whether we're traveling or at home. I just think it gives you a significant upgrade in terms of like refueling those guys and getting them to have their tank completely full by Saturday.

Those are the reasons from my end of it.

Q. On your offensive line, Anthony Donkoh is the only player we've seen string together starts in a Penn State uniform. Can you kind of guide us through what your offensive front is looking like right now, what you're working through, and maybe some key components of that?

MATT CAMPBELL: And Anthony is one of the young men that is coming back from injury. Anthony won't be available for the spring but will certainly be back full go by the time we get to the summer.

I think the thing for me that I'm excited about is the talent level in there. I think you look across the board, you've obviously got Dom Rulli who's played significant snaps, started in the bowl game, has been a significant contributor on special teams. You've got Trevor Buhr, who started the last two years at Iowa State and was one of the best offensive linemen in the Big 12. So those are the guys that really have like true, meaningful game reps.

Then I think what you have around that then are a lot of guys that are young football players that have a lot of talent and a lot of upside. I do, I think those are going to be huge races. We feel like at least right now, before we get into spring practice, there's ten guys that are going to be competing for starting spots. I think that part's really exciting.

I think you look at some of the young men that have been here, some of the young men that we brought in, I just think there's guys that have played meaningful football. Brock Riker is another guy that started meaningful reps and has started and played collegiate reps. Other than that, a lot of guys who have huge upside who are going to have to go prove it in spring ball and fall camp.

I'm excited because to me there's great competition, there's bodies, and there's ability that certainly has the ability to play high end football. Again, those guys are going to have to earn it. Those guys are going to have to win those jobs. Those jobs aren't going to be won in spring ball, they'll be won by the end of fall camp.

But I think you'll see those competitions, who are the starting five, who are the guys that are going to represent Penn State football this fall. It's going to be a process. We're not going to be there right away. I look forward to seeing those competitions unfold through spring and certainly through fall camp.

Q. I know it's early in the process for this particular question, but you've mentioned and Coach Lynn mentioned that multiplicity is an important part of your defensive belief. Given that you've been through one practice, I'm sure you have an idea of some of the guys that would make multiplicity capable in your front, in your secondary, wherever it might be. How do you go about determining at the start how to start all of that process. Who are some of the guys that maybe you have an eye on at the beginning here who can give you some of that multiplicity in your defense?

MATT CAMPBELL: Great question. It kind of goes back to the foundation of we have to be good at something by the time we end spring practice. I think the starting point there is trying to get a baseline on both sides of the ball is what do we want to get good at this spring so we can then go into the summer, evaluate our roster this spring, and then go into the summer and make sure that we build around the players?

I know I think I said this in maybe my opening press conference, last one, to me it's still about players, formations, place. Who are your players, and let's make sure we're putting those players in the best position to be successful. When it comes time to gain a result, let's make sure we're calling the plays that those players can be great impact.

I think when you look a little bit coming back, the one young man that's stood out to me from the day I've gotten here to where we're at, I think Zion Tracy is one of the best * football players that maybe I've coached, to be quite

honest with you, in terms of talent, ability. Man, you talk about being great in the moment, I think you go back to his -- to two years ago and he's the punt returner, the play he makes against Ohio State. I feel like every game, big moment, that guy has showed up and been an elite football player.

I think Zion can be one of the best corners in the country. I think he can be one of the best safeties in the country. He can play nickel. He can do a lot. When you have a chess piece like Zion, it gives you the ability to start to kind of navigate the rest of the defensive structure kind of around him.

I think Tony Rojas is a little bit in the same boat. Tony has had snippets of being healthy and playing high end football. You look again two years ago what he was doing. I know he had a shoulder issue but played through it and really showed up and played great football two years ago, obviously the early part of last year. Go back to that Oregon game, I think he makes some plays in that Oregon game that are wow plays.

Obviously Tony's battling back from injury, but man, he's been a warrior. He's been awesome to watch this off-season and how he's led.

I think those two guys have great position flexibility. Those guys can do a lot of things. You start there, and I think then you evaluate everything else. Obviously you want to be really great up front. I think that's critically important for us. I think we've got great depth, no different than the O-line. There's great competition on the D-line. There's some flexibility with our edge pieces that they can play in space and also have the ability to be great edge defenders.

I think Caleb Bacon has a little bit of that same flexibility. If you watch Caleb, he's played darn near defensive end to play mike and will linebacker. So he gives you a lot of flexibility in terms of being a chess piece for us.

I think Marcus Neal is no different. Marcus, one of the best players in the Big 12 over the last year and a half. Marcus, we asked him to play almost hybrid mike linebacker from the safety position to being the half safety. He's a great blitzer and gives you a lot of different flexibility.

So I think we have those players. It's like I keep hearing basketball, you want a guy that can play all five positions, and I think that's what they talk about in the basketball world. I don't think it's much different defensively. The more flexibility you have, the more you've got the ability to line up in different structures presnap, but post-snap have the ability to defend the gap, a responsibility, and have the ability to play a physical brand of football.

We're excited. That's just a little bit about that group. Hopefully that helps.

Q. When you look at how this team went through winter workouts, what stood out to you about the leadership group's development? Who are some of the guys going into spring ball you've seen maybe emerge into some of those roles?

MATT CAMPBELL: I think the biggest thing that I would take great pride in is I always start leadership with our senior class. It doesn't matter how you get to be a senior in college football today, but to be a senior in college football means you've gone through a lot.

I say this a lot as coaches, but I think it equates when you talk about seniority in college athletics, there are going to be scars. There's going to be really good days, and you've had to go through some really tough days. When you can use your scars as your super power, then you have a chance to have great success, and you have the ability to take that wisdom and you have the ability to give that back to the young people in the program.

When your seniors are givers, not takers, and they've got the ability to share their experience and what's gone well, what hasn't gone well and their own journey, and then the ability to help others not maybe take some of those missteps along the way or work through hard situations that they've had to work through, then I think powerful things can happen.

I think that I would just say our senior class has really done a great job of engaging in that mission, wanting to be servant leaders, understanding this value of selfless rather than selfish, which is hard.

You get to your senior year, and everybody has their own priority too. You get to the end of your collegiate career, whether that's life after football occupationally, whether that's, man, I want to go to the NFL. We have our own goals, dreams, and ambitions, but unfortunately, this is team sport, and the team has to be successful.

If we can gain our knowledge from our seniors, our veteran players in our football program, and they can help us grow and maybe mitigate some of the missteps for the young players so we can help them grow fast, then I think it gives us a chance to be really successful. I think just in a small way that senior class has really taken the reins and has really begun to do a great job giving back.

Again, we'll see more of this. We're going to go through some adversity in the spring. It won't go great all the time.

How do we work through it? Same thing in summer, same thing in fall camp. Until we get in the fire and we have real adversity and we have to go through some really hard things, then we'll see where our leadership is. I think we've at least taken some really good first steps.

Q. What would you say is the most concrete thing that you've noticed that inspires confidence in a room for you despite the newness of new staff and new players and a new place and also just the limited on-field tape that fans have access to at this point?

MATT CAMPBELL: Again, even the tape, you guys will get to come out to practice on Thursday, and some guys will look wow, some guys won't look wow, it is what it is. All that stuff is stuff, but to me, what's concrete is who are you day in and day out.

Can you consistently show up and have habits that, when these results come -- and the world we ask college football players to live in and college athletes today is you're so under scrutiny. You've got social media; you've got all these things. If you don't have a great foundation to you in terms of your habits and your process, then you're going to get thrown into this world, whether you have success or failure, and it's going to eat you alive.

It's really developing the habits it takes to consistently show up and get 1 percent better every day and have the habits it takes, whether yesterday was a good day or bad day, to show back up and to work and grow and get better.

I think the thing for me that's been really rewarding is we try to evaluate all that. We try to compete at that. We try to showcase success, guys cleaning their locker to showing up to class on time and sitting in the first two rows and being accountable, to we put over 480 pounds in eight weeks on our bodies because we ate breakfast and we were accountable to going to dinner every day.

You see guys really straining to start to develop the habits that it takes to consistently show up and do your job. Let alone that's hard enough for us coaches to do, we're asking 18 to 22-year-olds to start to understand what does that feel like and look like? I think that's one of the great rewards of coaching that you get to do.

Again, it's trying to develop that mentality and those habits that it takes to consistently be your best. How do each of us individually reach our full potential? Again, I think we try to do everything in our power to evaluate that so we can help our guys understand where their gaps are and then do a great job, if there are gaps, to how do we fill those in?

I guess concrete you would just be saying I really feel like

the last four to five weeks in our winter program, the consistency that our guys were doing the little things really, really well was really rewarding to watch, and the buy-in that our guys gave us to say I understand what you're talking about.

I appreciate their buy-in level, and I thought they did a really great job as we finished off -- again, can we do the same thing now when we have practice, or I have a good day or a bad day or I'm not where I want to be on the depth chart. All those things that are real things, just real. Can you have the ability to work through that and keep showing up and keep developing to be your best?

So a long-winded answer to it, and I don't even know if there's concreteness to it other than that's how we really try to build our football team, and that's really been our process.

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