

Big Ten Football Media Days

Thursday, July 22, 2021

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Northwestern Wildcats

Pat Fitzgerald

Press Conference



PAT FITZGERALD: It's great to be back in Lucas Oil Stadium. I look forward to hearing that fight song one of these times that we're in here. That would be sure nice. But it's great to be back and honored to be the head football coach at Northwestern.

So I would like to, first of all, say thank you to our great media partners and everyone that's here today supporting Big Ten football. Obviously I'm a little biased, but I believe it's the best football conference in America. And to be here now going into my 16th season seems somewhat surreal and it's because a lot of you covering us and exposing our brand that makes the game special and we look forward to sharing it again with you in our venues as we anticipate having full stadiums in Big Ten country this fall.

And a second excitement level about that would be for our fans. There's something different last year, we obviously were able to find a way to have success, but not having our great fans in the building is something that I know that all of our student-athletes, our staff and myself are looking forward to to say the least.

To our front line health care workers and those that have provided our health and safety, I want to say thank you, especially to our medical team up in Evanston. They did an amazing job last year, Jeff Mjaanes, our head team physician, and Kevin Kikugawa and his staff, our head athletic trainer. To go through the entire season without one COVID positive, I think the education that our medical team gave our players, but the execution of the plan and being incredibly unselfish and really truly sacrificing arguably as much as anybody did in the country is a credit to our players. Just really thankful for the job that they did a year ago.

It was great again to be back in Lucas Oil to represent the Big Ten West and that's obviously our challenge and our goal again this year is to build a team and the finishing touches during fall camp and put ourselves in position to get ready to play a Big Ten opener against Michigan State.

So it's going to be on us here pretty quickly, but our guys

have had a terrific summer and I know they're excited to get into camp and get things rolling. Exciting times in Evanston. To be, two out of the last three years to be the Big Ten West champs, to have two first round draft picks that we're incredibly proud of and three guys drafted. All 11 of our young men that worked out at Pro Day had an opportunity to get into a pro camp and I know those guys are all reporting right now and we wish them the best. And then to couple that with having the highest graduation rate in the country again I think truly shows that our model, what we did and how we do things, about being the best player development staff in the country is actually turning around the benefits on the field, but more importantly preparing our guys for life that we're incredibly proud of.

So exciting times ahead, I know you got great questions for me, so I'll open it up now. Thanks.

Q. I know better than to ask who your starting quarterback is going to be until -- I'm sure we won't find out until the opener, but what does Ryan Hilinski bring to the table that makes him a strong candidate to win the QB 1 job?

PAT FITZGERALD: As I look at our quarterback situation I think we got really good depth and I think we have got really good talent. Andrew and Ryan and Hunter, all three have game experience. Hunter in the, Hunter with us, Andrew with us and then Ryan in the SEC. So all three of those guys are going to compete here as we start camp, we'll make a decision, finalize that decision some time during camp, but all three guys had I thought, solid spring practices and we have got younger guys behind them too. So I think we got really good depth there at the quarterback position.

Q. It's tough to replace a guy like Mike Hankwitz as defensive coordinator. What do you like from Jim O'Neil? What has he brought to your program and what are you experiencing so far?

PAT FITZGERALD: Well, so far great familiarity. Jim was a GA for us and so we have known each other for a long time. You don't replace Mike Hankwitz. And as you look at 400 wins, 51 seasons, Hank was a true coaches coach, a



great mentor, a great teacher to all of us as a staff, and amazing with our players. But more importantly behind him was Cathy and Jake, so I don't want to minimize the impact that they had with Hank and a lot of us in the coaching profession are ecstatic for him with the run and the career he had and we'll miss him in coaching, but we're happy for him in retirement.

But Jim brings an energy level. He's committed to making this our defense. I believe I've got the best group of assistant coaches on defense in the country with Marty Long up front, Tim McGarigle at the linebacker position, and Matt MacPherson at the DB. So it's going to be a collaborative effort, it started in the off season, but it will continue on through training camp.

Q. When Rashawn and Greg got drafted you spoke about how at Northwestern you can have it all, with academics and success in the Big Ten. And based on those statements I wanted to ask you how do you feel about NIL and kind of how that impact into your you can have it all at Northwestern?

PAT FITZGERALD: I think NIL for all student-athletes is outstanding. I'm not going to lie to you, I'm a little jealous. I mean, think about the mid 90s the dough I would have made. I mean, come on? If I was here in Indy, I probably could get a free cup of coffee. But there's a lot of opportunities for growth and improvement in college football and the NCAA and I think NIL is the first step. I love listening to all the coaches in the SEC and the guys before me, We've got the best opportunity of NIL in Evanston, in Chicago. We're all trying to figure this thing out, so we need to get off thinking we have all got the best and work hard to educate our young men, educate their families, and then eventually put things in place to educate from the NCAA and the Big Ten level perspective student-athletes and their families.

This is a great opportunity, if used the right way, but it's a job. And you have to have the right resources around the student-athletes to support them and support their family. So I think we're going to all learn a lot through these next 12 to 24 months, but it's a positive first step. I'm just a little jealous.

Q. Last year's team was a very veteran team, for the most part. Obviously some young guys stepped up. But this year's team a lot younger, so has your preparation for the season changed, when you have guys like Paddy Fisher who have played like 50 games versus guys who haven't started before, has your preparation changed in the off-season at all?

PAT FITZGERALD: Yeah, I think your preparation always

changes based on your personnel. And it also changes on your coaching staff. So there were tweaks and changes, nothing earth shattering for me to announce today, but I knew the focus a little bit today would be on what we have lost, I couldn't be more excited about what we have. You look at the way we recruited, you look at where our recruiting is at right now, it's at an all-time high during my tenure. I'm really thankful for Jonny Kovach and our entire recruiting staff, Todd McShane and Bryan Payton, the whole group, it's a relentless group -- I'm missing a bunch -- Michael Conway -- that are just relentless in the behind the scenes, along with our coaching staff in recruiting, but also more importantly getting on campus in June and getting around our players I think is why we've had such great success. And that hurt us a little bit in COVID, but I think we have come out of it strong. But we have got exciting, an exciting locker room. I think we got as much depth and talent maybe in my time, but we'll see how it plays out as we go through camp. We're going to find out right away with a challenging opener Friday night against Michigan State at home, so we got a lot of work to do in these next six weeks getting ready for that game.

Q. With that opener coming up September 3rd, and you mentioned about the six weeks, the limiting of the NCAA rules of contact practices and fully padded practices this year, how does that make a challenge for a coach, especially a defensive coach, to get guys at game speed tackling early in the season and how do you plan on maybe minimizing or maximizing what you can do in that short period of time?

PAT FITZGERALD: There won't be a ton of changes to my routine, we morphed it a little bit from the standpoint of how we practiced about five years ago and it was all based on a long study that I did with our sports scientist, our athletic trainers and our strength staff to really put together a training camp to build our guys up getting prepared for the opener. I think it's really hard just in general to teach tackling right now the way the rules are. So we worked that fundamental and technique footwork wise and fundamentally from the minute we start our off-season workouts. You may not be taking someone to the ground but we're talking, teaching and working tackling every single day. The physical component to it, yeah, it might be limited a little bit this year in camp, so you got to be a little bit more creative in the way you do your drill work, a little bit more creative in the way you structure your practices, but for us locally at Northwestern it won't be that big of a change.

Q. You said you were jealous of these opportunities, is there any one in particular that you found interesting or great partnership or that you might be particularly jealous of that the players have come to terms with?



PAT FITZGERALD: Are you talking about name, image, likeness?

Q. Yes.

PAT FITZGERALD: Yeah, you know I just told the guys in our team meeting when we had it, I said, Listen, you got to understand this is a job and use it the right way and use all the resources we have around you, including your family, to make sure that you lock into smart deals, great deals, and you also understand the big picture here. A lot of you guys are going to be NFL players, let's not put your market level down here. So be really patient, work through it the right way -- and again I think as we sit here at this time next year, I think we're all going to have a really good idea where this is at. I just think it's comical listening to all of us head coaches talk about how great our fan bases and our Twitter handles are for NIL for our players. It has nothing to do with it. But it's been humorous to watch.

Q. Your back four of your defense, like AJ Hampton, Brandon Joseph, Coco Azema, how confident are you that Northwestern will boast one of the best secondaries in the Big Ten this fall?

PAT FITZGERALD: I have great confidence in our back end. That group is deep, you mentioned a handful of guys, there's more. I believe Matt McPherson, our recruiting staff have done a really, really solid job recruiting in that area, but that culture and brotherhood is owned by our DB's. They call themselves the Sky Team and that goes back a number of years. And that legacy of success and that group has been spectacular. To have Greg Newsome be the 26th pick overall and I think shows where we're going. But really excited about that group. There's no doubt it's deep it's talented and should be a lot of fun.

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