

Big Ten Football Media Days

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Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Northwestern Wildcats

Coach Pat Fitzgerald

Press Conference



KEVIN WARREN: Next at the podium is an outstanding person who leads the Northwestern University football program. He's been outstanding in the Chicago area working with entities who focus on young people with disabilities. It's hard for me to think it's 32 days we'll be kicking off with Ireland with Northwestern and Nebraska. Coach Fitzgerald has been outstanding in the conference. I look forward to watching them play next year.

Next to the stage is head football coach at Northwestern, Pat Fitzgerald.

PAT FITZGERALD: Good afternoon. It's great to be back with everyone again. Wow, here we go, college football 2022. 32 days from now we kick off the season. It's unbelievable how fast it's going to be upon us. Couldn't be more excited.

Appreciate the kind words from Commissioner Warren. Thank you to everyone here today and those around the country that cover Northwestern football in the Big Ten. Thank you so much for what you do and how you cover our institutions and our programs.

It's great to be back in Lucas Oil. Being here two out of the last three seasons has been something that I think everyone has as a goal as we kick off all of our 22 campaigns. To be here a couple years ago, it was definitely a motivator every time you step back into this building as you get ready to embark on this season.

I brought three absolutely outstanding young men and student-athletes with me here to represent our program. Offensively, offensive tackle Peter Skoronski jumped out onto the scene a few years ago and was an instant-impact offensive lineman for us.

On defense, then, Adetomiwa Adebawore, like Peter, came into our program, quickly made a difference, took a big step last year and look forward to watching him progress. No doubt has assumed the leadership of our football team and our defense.

Then Cam Mitchell, another young man, like Peter, from Chicago, Bolingbrook High School and in the footsteps of Greg Newsome who's playing for the Browns, is next up to be potentially a high draft pick for us. Again, great leadership on the back end and has had an outstanding career early in the kick game and most recently in the back end.

Again, you didn't come here to listen to me talk. I'm happy to answer any questions you have and excited to kick the season off. Our first practice is on Thursday, so let's make this fast. No, go ahead. Go Cats. Thanks.

Q. One of the toughest things about being in the Big Ten is some high highs and low lows that can follow quickly. What is your message to your guys this year who have been through that really good season two years ago and then the struggles from a year ago?

PAT FITZGERALD: You look at the whys. You take the whole off-season and look at the cut-ups, really take a deep dive schematically what we did, fundamentally what we did, how we can improve.

For us a year ago, we were maybe one of the youngest from an experience standpoint in the Big Ten where a lot of teams had most of their COVID guys come back. Two years ago we had our most veteran team, 11 guys get an opportunity to go on to the NFL. So that difference in that experience, we're back to that experience level with about 65 percent of our production, as you kind of take the quarterback position out of it.

So a lot coming back, and we need to draw on that experience. But fundamentally, we need to be better. We need to be better at just the basics of the execution of our offense, defense, kick game, and get back to playing at that championship level.

Again, we have enough veterans that have been part of both type seasons, and we need to lean on that experience to take the step back to, first of all, getting back to bowl eligibility and then competing for championships again. We expect to do that very quickly.



Q. USC and UCLA are joining the Big Ten in a couple of seasons. What are your thoughts on them being there and how it will impact you guys from a travel standpoint? Even though there's still time left between now and '23.

PAT FITZGERALD: I'm excited to add USC and UCLA. The expansion of our footprint from the East Coast to the West, you're going to wake up watching Big Ten football and go to bed watching Big Ten football. So that's exciting for our players, exciting for our fans.

There will be a travel component to it? There is, but we're going to Dublin in the opener, so it won't be that big of a deal.

When you look at the opportunities, especially for a school like Northwestern, we recruit worldwide. We have a huge alumni base in Southern California. A few years back I spoke at the contemporary art museum to about 400 alums. We've always recruited California. I'm excited to add that component to it. Where it's going to go and how things are going to shake out before we get to '24, I think we'll all be excited to see how that goes.

It will definitely be a new thing and a new opportunity, but I think the commissioner said it best, change is kind of the word of college football right now. We'll lean forward and embrace that.

Q. When you lose a guy of a caliber like Brandon Joseph, who went over to Notre Dame, what does that do for your backfield this year?

PAT FITZGERALD: Transfers are part of the college football landscape right now. We brought some outstanding newcomers into our program. We've added competitive depth, I think, at positions we needed to, up front on the defensive line, for sure is an area we felt like we needed to add a little more competitive depth, and I'm excited about that.

Again, change is upon us. Maybe 17 years ago when I first stood up here as a first-year head coach, if you lost a player or two, it was something might be wrong with your program. Now it's just maybe a better opportunity for a young person or another institution. I've always been a firm believer in helping student-athletes out and helping them do whatever's best for them and for their families and for their futures.

If it's the guys that depart, they know, and I've had these conversations with them, that I'll always be there for them. The guys that we bring in as newcomers, I couldn't be more ecstatic to have them here with us.

From a back end standpoint, it gives some guys who maybe didn't have an opportunity a new opportunity to showcase their skills and get out there and become starters. I feel like our secondary is probably one of our strengths on our team. Looking forward to watching those guys as they move forward this year.

Q. I think that every other Big Ten school has some sort of NIL entity or collective or nonprofit set up. I'm not sure I've seen one from Northwestern. Do you have any insight as to whether one will be announced? If not, is that a concern at all?

PAT FITZGERALD: Yeah, private school. We don't have to tell you. I'm just joking.

There's a lot of things that are in the works. I'm a little jealous of the guys right now, mid-'90s, NIL, you know, it would have been a good deal for me. But I'm doing fine. I have no complaints.

I'm all for whatever makes the experience of the guys better. We've done a lot of things behind the scenes. You saw probably yesterday the announcement of the GM with Altius and things of that nature that we're progressing to. I'm really excited for our guys to have that in-house opportunity for them to go to to be able to leverage their brand and leverage being in the Chicagoland market, which is outstanding.

We're going to do things at Northwestern in the Northwestern way. It's not about being first. It's about striving to do what's best and in the right way. I have full confidence our guys will be taken care of in the right way in the ways we think fit our institution, our values.

Then the outside entities, you really can't control, but I think our alums and the folks that touch our program understand the importance of this and want to make sure our guys are taken care of from the standpoint of professional growth opportunities, financial opportunities, and look at this thing a little bit more holistically than maybe just a few more dollars for a burger or something like that, look at it a little bit more broad based.

Q. I wanted to ask you a little bit about Evan Hull at running back. He seemed to really play well late in the year in particular. What kind of skills does he bring, and how can he help your team move forward this year?

PAT FITZGERALD: Evan's a complete back. You look at over a thousand yards rushing the ball. We weren't maybe the balance we wanted to have, so people were able to

load the box and do that. A lot of that Evan was able to do after contact. That shows you about his toughness and physicality.

He led the Big Ten as far as running backs in a receiving component. So he's got great hands. I think he can be more involved also in the kick game, and he's done a terrific job leading this summer. Just been so fun to watch Evan grow throughout his time in our program.

A lot of that credit goes to him. He's always been a first guy to show up, last guy to leave kind of mentality. To watch him mature and think, well, wait a second, maybe if I get an extra hour's sleep or a little bit more recovery, I'll see a return on that investment.

He's just a complete player, a complete person. We're really counting on him to get back to winning ways and get back to championship football.

Q. If the Big Ten does away with divisions and goes into a couple protected rivalries, are there a couple rivalries in particular that you would prefer get protected?

PAT FITZGERALD: That's a great one. I think it will be interesting to see how that plays out. Again, before I was a football coach, I was a football fan of the Big Ten.

I'll go back to when we actually had ten teams, we played everybody, and it was like this really unique thing. That was pretty awesome, I think, for us as student-athletes and as fans. I hope we're able to do that. I think it's less about the rivalries and more making sure that our players and our fans are able to step into every venue and able to experience the pageantry of Big Ten football and find a way to be able to put that into the schedule.

It's going to be complicated. But when you look at it from a holistic standpoint, I hope that's the experience of our Big Ten student-athletes. Being able to play a game in Piscataway, New Jersey, and going out and able to play a regular season game in the Coliseum or the Rose Bowl and everything in between, nobody else will be able to say that. You're talking about unique, iconic venues, cathedrals of college football that are in the Big Ten landscape. The ability to participate in that as a student-athlete is always what's made Big Ten football special, and I hope we're able to keep that.

The rivalries, that will be fun. We'll create some cool trophies. One will be Illinois for us, and beyond that, we'll figure it out. Most, if not all of our rivalries in the Big Ten have been built on respect, and I'm sure that tradition will continue.