

Big Ten Football Media Days

Thursday, July 27, 2023

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Nebraska Cornhuskers

Coach Matt Rhule

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We're joined by Nebraska head coach Matt Rhule.

COACH RHULE: It's great to be here. Thank you all for being here and covering Nebraska football.

I want to make sure I begin by thanking Tony Petitti and the entire Big Ten Conference. In my short amount of time it's been first-class, and all the other coaches have been amazing.

I want to thank Trev Alberts who is here with us. I appreciate him giving me this job and this great opportunity. I want to thank everyone back home, everyone in Nebraska. It's been an amazing six months. Excited to get to the season.

I brought three players -- Luke Reimer, Jeff Sims and Ethan Piper. All three of those guys, they're not just here for their own accomplishments -- and they're all very accomplished -- they're also here because they represent our team.

And I know it's just the beginning -- we're just getting started. But I like this team. I like our players. And I hope you see really good football this fall.

Q. Week two, you guys play Colorado, huge old-school rivalry. What do you know about that game? And what have you heard about that game since you came to Nebraska?

COACH RHULE: If you know me you know I love college football. I'm a college football junkie. And I remember the great days, Coach Osborne versus Coach McCartney, Rashaan Salaam, all the great players that played there.

I think it's good for college football. I think it's great when we have regional rivalries where fans can drive to them. I think it's good for the game.

As I was looking at this job, my wife and son and I, we sat down, went on YouTube, watched some of the old games.

I wanted to make sure they understood what being at Nebraska means and what a game against Colorado means.

So I'm excited for it. Obviously they're doing a great job at Colorado and we'll try to do our part to make sure it's a great thing for college football.

Q. Now that you're at Nebraska, I've got to ask this question: Are you a chili and cinnamon rolls guy?

COACH RHULE: I had never heard of it before. I was a little scared when I first heard it. But I married a woman who went to culinary school. As you can tell, I like great food and great things.

I went to a recruit's house and mom made it for me. It's a little bit life-changing. It's pretty good. So, yes, I am.

Q. You touched on this a little bit before, but what to you is a successful first season for Nebraska?

COACH RHULE: I've really thought about this. We want to compete in every game we play. We play to win the game, as Coach Morris says. We're going to go out and try to win every game.

I think there's something bigger for us at Nebraska. There was a time when Nebraska football was feared, and we certainly want to get back to that.

We want to be a team that you say, you know what, that team's feared. But we're not at that point yet. We're at a point where I believe we have to take back the respect of what it means to play Nebraska and to be at Nebraska.

I want people to respect when they see that white helmet with that red N on it. I want our fans to respect us when they pay their money to come watch us to play. And I want our opponents to respect us. And I want all of college football to respect the way Nebraska plays the game.

And most importantly I want our players to respect what it means to be a Cornhusker and playing at Nebraska. This season for me is all about us, not just earning, but taking



back respect and bringing back respect to Nebraska football.

Once you earn respect then you can talk about being feared. And that's the process we're going to go through.

Q. I'm wondering if there's anything specifically you're doing different to prepare for your first season of the Big Ten than you did for your first season in the Big 12 or with Temple, stuff like that.

COACH RHULE: I think I've been very blessed that Coach Osborne has been willing to share some things with me. We have a little bit larger roster than I've had at other places I've been.

So really practicing in the ways that Coach Devaney and Coach Osborne, Coach Solich did for 42 years of dominance, having multiple stations, multiple drills going on.

A lot like we practiced at Penn State. But I haven't done it for many years, and getting back to it this spring has been really good for us.

So I think that's maybe not about the Big Ten; it's more about being at Nebraska. I'd be a fool if I didn't ask Coach Osborne what the blueprint is. He doesn't talk about plays; he talks about the way they practice, first and foremost.

I've evolved, being in the NFL, being in different places -- this is my fourth head coaching job -- I tried to be really intentional taking this job and how am I going to do it.

I say "I." But I've got great coaches. They bring to the table a lot of great ideas, and we'll try to put it together as best we can.

Q. There's no denying that you have hit the ground running when it comes to recruiting. It's something that hasn't been seen at Nebraska since Bill Callahan was the coach. You completely locked down the state of Nebraska. Want to know, was that ideal?

COACH RHULE: I think the great thing for me was -- I don't know if it was great. I was out of work when I took this job. So I had some time. In between like driving my kids to school and pickups and all that, I spent a lot of time looking at recruits.

Evan Cooper, who's on my staff, who has really been my recruiting guy, right-hand guy all along, we watched not just the kids that were committed to Nebraska, we watched the 2023 class that was still out there, we watched the 2024s, the 2025s. And what I saw was, you know what,

there's a lot of talent in Nebraska.

Even this year, we had 3,000 kids come through our camps. We wanted to reinvigorate the camps, everyone from third grade all the way up through seniors in high school. Guys came to our camps from small towns all across the state that maybe weren't on our radar, but they certainly are now.

That was all intentional. That's part of the reason we took the job. If you're strong at home, if there's talent coming from Nebraska, then you're going to win.

We have a certain ratio we want to have. We want to make sure we always have hometown kids there, guys who grew up and being a Cornhusker means something a little bit more to them. And that was important to me. And so to keep that talent home was good.

And I think that's good when you bring a kid in from Florida, a kid in from Texas, to be surrounded by guys that are local, that can take them home, show them a little love, parents that will adopt them and they'll be there for them. That's how you have a program like Nebraska take off.

Q. When you're a Cornhusker, it means a little bit more. Couple of years ago, Nebraska lost at Wisconsin, guys were praying on the 50-yard line after the game. Less than 24 hours, the Waukesha parade tragedy occurred where many lives were lost. We give a lot of credit at Wisconsin just seeing your guys there on the field praying less than 24 hours before that happened. As a coach, how are you going to continue to build that culture and that climate that I think your team is really known for throughout the Big Ten?

COACH RHULE: I think our program, our entire program is built on really one purpose. We have a mission that we want to be the best team in college football and the best program in college football in the way we do everything.

But really our purpose and my purpose for taking this job and being in college football is so that young people, when they're 25, 30, 35, 40, they say, you know what, my life is better because I went to Nebraska.

People might scoff at that, but that's why we do what we do. So we try to attack each and every day every single player in terms of who they are as football players but who they are as students and also as people, young people in our society.

There's never been a time where there's been more peril towards our younger generations. Coming out of COVID they're way less resilient, way less connections.

Whereas, when I grew up, my connections were the Boy Scouts and the high school and the local church, all these things. Kids nowadays are suffering from stress and anxiety and depression, and a lot of it people believe is because they don't have those connections. A lot of kids are just connected to their phones.

Our program, if you watch it, we're out in the community all the time. And Gus Felder, our player development guy, does a tremendous job. We're impacting the community because I want us to have connections, connections to each other, connections to the community.

A lot of education is online now, but even then we're still doing it in our academic environment because kids, they can't leave college and not know how to be in a meeting. They can't learn not how to have discourse. They can't not know how to disagree with people and listen to other people. Wouldn't the world be a better place if we all knew how to disagree with each other respectfully?

And then the spiritual component, whatever their worldview is. We have players that are Christian, Muslim, players that maybe don't believe in anything. Whatever their worldview is, we're there to walk them through that. We're there to be there for them. Because who they are as people is way more important than who they are as players.

That might not be popular, and we all want to talk about transfer portals and NIL and all that stuff, that's cool. This group of kids is going to wake up in 10 years, and all that will be gone, and who they are as people will matter.

That's kind of our purpose, and I appreciate the question.

Q. Can you speak to the timing of your hire and how it allowed you to impact the program in some immediate ways, particularly as it relates to the building, the facility you're set to open soon and what kind of an impact that can have on your players?

COACH RHULE: Well, the GO BIG project, the facility that was being built, started obviously by the previous regime, I think is a game-changer. You might have heard me say this before, but when my wife walked through it for the first time -- she's been in a lot of football facilities -- she walked into my office and she said, "You better win some dang games because you've got no excuses."

It's beautiful. And it was all set. There's not really many changes I can make nor that needed to be made. I think the one thing is really a focus not on recruiting but on player development.

I didn't want the first thing that you walked in and saw to be like our shoes. I wanted it to be like our mission, our purpose, and so recovery, regeneration, all the things -- I've had a chance to be around some of the best athletes in football. You see the way they take care of their bodies.

Really, Trev has allowed us to -- from nutrition, to strength and conditioning, sports science, recovery -- put the best things in the world in that building so that we can be on the cutting edge and our players can recover and be as healthy as possible. I'm glad I got there at that time to help do that.

Q. With your experience, playing in the Big Ten but now coming back to coach in the Big Ten, can you define Big Ten football, what maybe what it was and now what you hope it can be?

COACH RHULE: When I was coming back to college football, Julie and I were very intentional that we wanted two things, really. We wanted to go somewhere where we wanted to raise our kids, and I can't think of a better place than Lincoln to raise the kids, and we wanted to be in the Big Ten.

I think we have a responsibility as coaches to prepare our guys obviously for life but also for pro football.

When you watch the way teams play in the Big Ten, the way they play defense, the way they play up front, the schemes you see, it prepares them for the next level.

So I think you're watching, there's a shift. There's a lot of new coaches. There will be more diversity in terms of the offenses. We're bringing in a 3-3-5 defense that not many teams are running.

You'll see some differences. But to thrive in a conference as prestigious as the Big Ten, you have to be a little different and you have to evolve.

I'm excited to go through my first year. I may have a different answer next year. I've studied a lot of teams. I have a lot of respect for these coaches and their teams.

Q. With a program that's so hungry to win and has been hungry for a long time and used to win, how do you keep the players and the staff and even the fans from getting ahead of themselves?

COACH RHULE: That to me, not letting people get ahead of themselves, is the whole key. What I'll say about Nebraska, it's literally written on the side of the stadium "Day By Day." That's the key. It wasn't that we ran the ball



or ran option or played this defense, it was this mindset from Coach Osborne, from Coach Devaney, from Coach Solich, every little detail matters every single day.

Like we have to earn the right to even talk about playing Minnesota. We have to go to training camp, and we have to every single day be elite in every single area.

That's the whole core of what we try to do, is to block out all the noise and block out all our thoughts and learn from the past, prepare for the future, but live in the present. That present focus is what will determine who we are.

Right now we have to deal with the fact that guys haven't won and they want to win. At some point, Sam, we're going to be winning, and we have to deal with the fact that everyone is going to lose their mind and be happy all the time. Like, you're the same person whether you lost or won, whether you lost or won, if you're a good coach and good player. We want to have that every-single-day, locked-in focus of today is all that matters.

I really studied Coach Belichick a lot and had a chance to go up and coach against him in a practice in a preseason game. And one of his key guys was working for us, and I remember him saying, like, after they handed out the Super Bowl trophy, you never watched -- he never looked at it again because that trophy and those rings had nothing to do with the future.

So for me, our guys know that you can win a national championship in Nebraska, because it's been done, but we have to concentrate on today. Not even game one or game five. Today, today, that's all that matters.

I'm trying to do my best job today, and tomorrow I'll do tomorrow; and I can't wait for Sunday, but I can't forget about Friday and Saturday before I get there.

That's our mindset. That's why I believe that we'll win. And I'm grateful to everybody. Thanks for listening to me.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports