

Big Ten Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 24, 2024

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

USC Trojans

Coach Lincoln Riley

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Next up is USC's Lincoln Riley. Coach Riley, welcome to the Big Ten. We'll begin with your opening statement.

LINCOLN RILEY: Thank you. It's an honor to be here today, honor to be welcomed into the Big Ten. Obviously a historic day and year getting ready to come up. Certainly really excited about where this is going.

I know this has been an idea that's been talking about for a long time, been discussed, and now I think we're all glad that it's finally here. Really looking forward to the season, the incredible matchups that are going to take place in the Big Ten Conference. It's an honor to be a part of.

I know our team, our program are all very, very much looking forward to it.

Before I get into our team, I also want to mention I know a couple of my counterparts have said some of the same things regarding this notion, but obviously Mike Leach meant a lot to my career, instrumental in my upbringing.

I know there's been a lot of debate and talk about him belonging in the College Football Hall of Fame, and certainly want to voice my support for that happening here on this stage. That's something that's very important to me. He changed the game and changed a lot of people's lives, mine included, in the process of it.

I know there's technicalities and rules that have to happen, but I totally agree that the Hall of Fame is simply not complete without Mike Leach being in that, and just certainly wanted to be able to represent that here on this stage.

Regarding our football team here at USC, there's a lot of excitement, and I think really this season in some ways for us began in the Holiday Bowl in our win against Louisville where we took a lot of our younger players, a lot of the guys that we've been developing behind the scenes over our first two years in Los Angeles into a game against a really good opponent. Obviously the guys played really

well, handled the situation well.

And I feel like there's been a lot of momentum within the program off of that game, some of the moves that we've made, some of the changes that we've implemented over the first two years.

So we certainly have had a great off-season. We've welcomed the addition of D'Anton Lynn along with a new defensive staff that we think makes it one of the preeminent defensive staffs in the country, and certainly can feel that impact on our field and within our program. Certainly that was obviously a big change and a big focus point for us this off-season.

Going into the Big Ten Conference this year, we're certainly looking forward to the new venues, the new challenges, getting a chance to compete against other great players, other great coaches throughout the league. The one thing that I've been steadfast on since the day I got to Los Angeles was our standards will never change there. Our standards at USC are to compete for championships, whether we're in the beginning of this rebuild that we undertook two years ago and throughout our entire time here, which is going to be a long time.

We are certainly looking forward to competing for championships every year, and now it's just Big Ten Championships. So really, really looking forward to the season, looking forward to the matchups, and really a historical first year for USC in the Big Ten Conference.

Q. I wanted to ask you about Zachariah Branch. What are some of the improvements that you've witnessed during the spring ball and what are some of the improvements you would like to see him continue on this season as you all move forward?

LINCOLN RILEY: Zachariah Branch had really an exciting freshman year for us. He's an explosive player. Even when you're used to being on the college football field and really talented players are somewhat the norm, he's a little bit different in the way he moves and also his strength.

He had a great year for us last year, especially as a



returner, was one of the most dominant returners in the country, if not the most. We've really challenged him this year to become a bigger part and a more consistent part of our offense. I think that is really going to be part of his evolution.

He had some really good moments for us offensively last year, but he wasn't as impactful as he was on special teams. Certainly I think he's growing as a receiver, as a ball carrier, understanding offenses, understanding route running, understanding defenses, how we're trying to attack people. There's just a maturity and a growth process that we've really pushed him on, and I think he's handled it well.

We've got a really talented young group of receivers there. They got a chance to showcase their skills in the bowl game. Certainly have had a really good spring and look forward to big things this season.

Q. You guys were able to hire D'Anton Lynn in this off-season. What was the hiring process like with Lynn, and what has impressed you so far through about six months of work with D'Anton on your staff?

LINCOLN RILEY: We had some time. Certainly we had six weeks in between our last regular season game and then the Holiday Bowl. So we were able to get a little bit of a head start on that search.

Listen, the number of names that wanted this job was pretty cool. Honestly it was probably a little bit different than what it would have been two years ago when we came to L.A., so I thought that was really revealing, just within our profession, about how this job is viewed.

Honestly, my first call with D'Anton was probably a 30-minute call one night, and I hung up the phone, and I knew deep down in my gut like that's the guy we're going to hire. I just thought he fit what we want to do from a team and a culture standpoint. He obviously authored the biggest turnaround in defensive college football last year, and I got to see a front-row seat at that.

Playing UCLA, obviously, like we do every year, I thought the changes he made there were staggering. I loved his NFL experience, especially some of the things that he came out of. Then we shared, I think, a lot of very similar beliefs in how great defense should be played and developed, kind of finished each other's sentences in terms of philosophy and how we felt like this would be built.

I think the last thing was a guy that was going to be able to -- we're still on our climb here, and our talent base has gotten better and it's going to continue to get better. But I

want coaches that can adapt to what we have on a given year, and I think the best coaches are able to do that. I think D'Anton certainly has an eye and an ability to do that at a high level.

Q. You had 135 missed tackles during the season, only 6 in the bowl game. How much can that be attributed to Lynn coming in? And getting Matt Entz to come in from a program that he was and the success he had, what was the process of getting him to come in and be a part of the defense?

LINCOLN RILEY: D'Anton wasn't even coaching, so hell, if he did that, wait until you see what he does when he's actually coaching.

I think the guys in the bowl game, I think there was just a different mentality around the football team. That's honestly the best way that I can explain it. Those six weeks, it was almost like you had a new team. In a lot of ways, we did. There was just a great mentality going into that game. We tackled well, and I give a lot of credit to our players and the way we prepared and played that night.

It's certainly a great blueprint for us going forward on the mentality that you have to play with. I think just the momentum and really just the togetherness. I think the bowl game was the most together that our football team was all of last year, and I think it showed that night.

Yeah, hiring Matt Entz among others on the defensive staff were certainly just as important as the defensive coordinator hire. Matt was a little bit of an outside-the-box hire, but I've always been a fan of what those guys have done at North Dakota State, the job they've done developing players, consistently playing at a high level, playing very disciplined football.

Then the ability to bring in a guy that's been a coordinator, that's been a head coach, I just felt like it's going to make every part of our program better, not just our defense, not just our linebacker room.

And he's certainly done that. To be able -- for D'Anton to have that guy in the room, for me to be able to grab Coach Entz and talk about things more from a head coaching perspective has been great. He's brought some tremendous ideas in terms of development that we've implemented in our program.

So it would be, I think, foolish of me to bring in a guy like that and not use him and not lean on him. We certainly have done that, and he's been just a tremendous addition to our staff.

Q. Lincoln, in regards to the defense, how much has this defense kind of molded and changed the identity of the team just based on -- you talk about all the new coming people and all the coaches you've brought in, how have they really kind of set a tone for the team? And in regards to Hall of Fame coaches, Jeff Tedford stepped down. What does his impact on you in regards to just developing QBs and the West Coast offense and growing the game, what impact has he had on you?

LINCOLN RILEY: Coach Tedford, obviously we're all really just keeping him in our thoughts. Obviously hated to see that news. He's been somebody I've watched from afar for a long time. Got a chance to compete against him many years ago in the Holiday Bowl, but obviously the job he's done with quarterbacks, with offenses, with teams, he's been one of those guys that I've always watched and admired very much.

I've gotten to know him a little bit here over the last few years, which has been great. Certainly wish him the best.

I think in terms of our defense, listen, we know that's an area that we have to take jumps, and that's why we made the changes that we made. I think our team and the people within the walls and that actually know what's going on feel that momentum. You could feel it in spring ball, and I think all of our players -- offense, defense, special teams -- are all equally excited about the changes that were made and the way that our defense performed this spring and the momentum that's coming.

Q. I apologize in advance, but I've got to ask this question. A few years ago you sent out a tweet that went viral, fair or unfair, about your smoked Easter brisket. Just curious if you're still working on your barbecue skills out in L.A.?

LINCOLN RILEY: I need to improve my photography skills, not my barbecuing skills. Absolutely, I got to work on it a little bit this summer.

Q. This past off-season, USC has been the topic of conversation even at other conference media days. What's your takeaway from that? What do you think the message is behind that?

LINCOLN RILEY: That's part of being at USC. It's part of being a Blue Blood program. I've had a chance to be in two of them. I'm here for the last several years. The thing that you learn pretty quickly is everything in programs like this is going to be sensationalized one way or another.

It's always going to be talked about, and you either want to

be in programs like that or you don't. If you want to, you've got to take the good with the bad or the crazy or however you want to describe it.

No, I take it as a compliment that we're on a lot of people's minds, and I will say -- listen, if I sat there and listened to every person that told me or teams that I've been a part of that we couldn't do things, then I wouldn't have been able to enjoy all the success we've had over the years.

There's a lot of people inside this business, certainly inside our walls at USC, even in the media, that I very much respect and very much look forward to hearing their opinions and love to conversate and talk about the game. But honestly, anybody outside of that, I just made a decision a long time ago to not pay attention to it, and I think that's served me well so far.

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