

Big 12 Conference Football Media Days

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Arlington, Texas, USA

Kansas State Wildcats Coach Chris Klieman Press Conference



CHRIS KLIEMAN: It's great to be back here at AT&T Stadium. Last year was a different experience for us because we came down here and checked out the facilities. We were playing here on September 2nd of that year.

And it's fun to be back here. I'd be remiss if I didn't thank Commissioner Bowlsby for his service in the Big 12 for so long and his friendship with myself and my family. Bob Bowlsby and my family go back a long ways, and Bob was the athletic director at Northern Iowa when I was a player there.

So appreciate everything that Bob has done for my family as well as for the Big 12, and excited in welcoming Commissioner Yormark into the Big 12, and looking forward to many more years of great football to come.

As far as Kansas State, we're excited. We have very optimistic, high expectations, as everybody does this time of year, but we've got a lot of work to do. Have a number of guys back on both sides of the ball, but as the landscape of college football is right now, it's going to be the new players that you've got to mesh with those returning players that are going to be the key to your success.

And we have a number of positions where we're going to have a lot of new faces out there. Some were here in the spring, many of them were not here in the spring, so for us to get together with those guys in August and have a great fall camp and put the work in so that come September we can start off the fall with a good season.

We'll open it up for questions.

Q. Coach, what really drew you to Adrian when he entered the transfer portal, and what have you seen from him that made you bring him to Big 12 Media Days as a leader?

CHRIS KLIEMAN: Well, the thing that drew us to him was

the amount of games he has played at Nebraska. If you get around Adrian or you visit with Adrian, the first thing that jumps out at me is his maturity and what a grounded individual he is.

I've been so impressed with him as a person, as a man of faith, as somebody that came in and missed all the spring because of an injury he had. He practiced the last two practices, but just watching him bond with the players, watching him build relationships during the time when he couldn't be out front leading after a workout or after a practice, and now to see him going through the summer where he is cleared and healthy and watching him just kind of command the room, he's a tremendously mature individual that brings out the best in everybody. That's what excites me about him.

But what drew us to him was obviously his games played and his maturity.

Q. Felix Anudike-Uzomah has had a whirlwind last 12 months. He came into last season kind of unheralded and is going into this season as the Preseason Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year. What have you seen out of his growth, and what makes him so special?

CHRIS KLIEMAN: Felix, a couple things. One, he's as good a practice player as he is a game player in the fact of he goes and goes hard. He watched Wyatt Hubert do the same thing. So he learned from Wyatt, especially during that COVID year, of how to train and how to work your body and how to play so dang hard play after play.

He's got a lot of confidence now, and I'm excited because I think Felix had a breakout season last year. And I think if you could ask him, I think he can be better, and he thinks he can be better, as well, especially when you put the surrounding pieces around him, because we have most of our defensive line back that it's hard to just double somebody.

But Felix is so smart and understands the game. I give a lot of credit to Coach Wyatt and Coach Tui for putting him in positions, and then Felix in making sure that he's watching enough film and seeing tendencies.

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But I'm excited; Felix is a terrific football player and one of our better leaders, as well.

Q. Collin becomes the offensive coordinator once again, and you remember what his success was in Manhattan as a quarterback. When you look at him and Adrian and how they use their legs, how important is it for them to work together, and how have you seen them develop throughout the summer?

CHRIS KLIEMAN: Well, for starters, I'm so excited for Collin Klein. He's earned the opportunity during our three weeks leading up to the bowl game and then playing as well as we did in the bowl game and just watching him lead and command the room and have the respect of the players.

And then as far as he and Adrian, I get to sit in on a lot of the quarterback meetings, and just seeing the dialogue between all the quarterbacks and Coach Klein, but in particular Will and Adrian always having great dialogue with CK, and just continuing to put Collin's own spin on the offense.

We're going to make some adjustments. We probably are going to keep some things the same, some of our terminology that we'd had when Mess was here, but we're still going to try to find a way to get 22 the football. Everyone wants to make sure Deuce gets his touches, but I'm excited to see Collin and Adrian because they are very similar type of players, type of people, and they both are very driven.

I'm looking forward to seeing how those two mesh together. I'm excited because I know they will mesh really well.

Q. You talked about Deuce and he's going to get his touches, obviously, rightfully so, but I was curious if you could go into detail about his development as a leader and what he's done to develop the rest of the running back room and how you've seen that progress.

CHRIS KLIEMAN: Yeah, as a junior now, he's had to take on some leadership role. It's easy to ask a sophomore to do that, but when we had kids like Noah Johnson and Skylar Thompson, he really didn't need to.

Well, he's an older guy now, and I've been really proud of the way that he has kind of commanded the running back room and done some things with those new running backs, whether it's a freshman that we have or a transfer that we have coming in; that he's taking them into the film room

and showed them kind of how to watch film, and things to look for as far as taking them out on the field and doing some of their own drills and just kind of explaining to them kind of his craft.

It's the work ethic that you see with Deuce Vaughn that I think everybody feeds off of his work ethic, whether it's on the field, it's in the classroom, it's in the film room, it's in the weight room. The kid works so hard. And to see your younger players watch arguably your best football player put the work in on a daily basis in all these areas, as well as doing community service, to say: You can do all these things and be successful. And so Deuce is becoming a tremendous leader for our football team.

Q. What do you make of your team leading the conference in All-Big 12?

CHRIS KLIEMAN: A couple things. One, guys did some really good things last year that garnered that recognition. I look at it and applaud our staff, coaches, support staff, recruiting staff for continuing to set the standard in recruiting and continue to recruit quality student-athletes here and developing them.

And then take that development stage, whether it's Scott Trausch in nutrition to Tru Carroll in strength and conditioning to Mindy Hoffman in athletic training, so many people are going to have an impact on your career, and taking all those people seriously and learning from all those people so that you can become the best version of yourself.

And to have six guys that are receiving accolades is pretty neat. I think of the handful; that I would have said, boy, that one would have deserved it, as well. So I'm excited because I think every team probably has those unheralded four or five guys that you think, well, that kid is going to really surprise some people because of how talented they are. But I was excited for those six guys.

I didn't pay attention to who was first, who was second as far as leading the conference, just the fact that those guys got the recognition they deserved.

Q. I was curious about now that you're in the second year with a new defense, has it changed maybe the way you're recruiting to those positions, and what might have changed and what are you looking for now that maybe you weren't before?

CHRIS KLIEMAN: Yeah, good question. It's interesting, I had a conversation with somebody else earlier today. Last year when we went into fall camp we were still unsure if we were going to wholesale three down or still play four down.

And so we practiced both of them because we'd recruited mostly to four down. So we had them both working all through fall camp. And then it was kind of our players that said they felt more comfortable with the three down.

And that's how we started this game, the game against Stanford in here, and played really fast, and the kids just fell in love with it.

From the recruiting standpoint, we're still looking for long athletes that can play in space or put their hand down from a linebacker defensive end standpoint, and then we're looking for that big defensive lineman like an Eli Huggins, like a Jaylen Pickle that can hold point at the nose. Still trying to recruit guys that can run and hit in the secondary.

But this will be our first full season with not wavering to think, are we going to go to a four down, but we're staying with a three down, so it gave us the opportunity in the off-season to do some professional development with our staff, to go to different places that are running some three down; that we were pretty vanilla, we thought, last year with our three down, and we probably need to be a little bit more aggressive and add a few more wrinkles.

Q. Chris, after your stint at North Dakota State where winning National Championships was the bar every year, I'm just wondering how you look back and rate a pair of eight-win seasons so far in your tenure and what you think about building on it.

CHRIS KLIEMAN: Yeah, that was the bar that was set, and there was no variant to that bar. You were winning a National Championship or you weren't going to be there very long.

When I came in here in 2019, I really wanted to make sure we got back to a bowl game. I thought that was really important to get back to bowl eligibility and have the opportunity to be successful and win every game and be in every game, to win every game.

And never set a sight on we need to win this amount of games. I've never believed in that as far as saying, well, we have to win seven, eight, nine, whatever the amount of games are. Nor have I ever put the importance on, boy, this game is the most important one. Because then what are you going to tell the kids the next week, this one is not important?

So just trying to put an emphasis on a week-to-week basis of playing our best football.

The thing that we need to be better at so that we can

continue to push towards a Big 12 Championship, which is the ultimate goal, is to be more consistent week in and week out.

Take the 2020 season out of it when nobody knew who was going to be in the lineup week to week. In 2019 and, more specifically, 2021, where we knew our roster better, is -- just weren't -- haven't been consistent enough in all three phases, offense, defense and teams. And that's what we're trying to do, is be more consistent.

Part of that is recruiting and development and having more players so that when you do get nicked up, you don't fall off and you don't put a player out there that maybe isn't ready to be out there.

All that being said, this is still where we're at with the landscape of college football; that you're going to have to play some kids that are really new to your program. It's just your job to get them up to speed as quickly as you can.

I think we're on the right trajectory, but I know there's more in us.

Q. How exciting has it been to keep those in-state recruits?

CHRIS KLIEMAN: Yeah, we really can't talk about recruiting per se right now with the NCAA rules, but it's just important for us to do well in the state of Kansas. I've said that since I was here in 2019. It's important for us to do well in the state.

Q. You had so much success last year with those plug-and-play guys in the secondary with Stubblefield, Yeast, those types of guys. How are you feeling going into camp about specifically the safety positions?

CHRIS KLIEMAN: Yeah, probably our biggest question mark, to be honest with you, as we head into fall camp. We had a couple of guys that were here in the spring in Kobe Savage, and then we had TJ Smith back and Cincere Mason who was coming off an injury.

But we've really plugged and added three or four guys this summer that we haven't had the chance to spend a lot of time with. But I'm excited to get into fall camp so that myself, Van Malone, Joe Klanderman -- we've got three secondary coaches that are going to have to coach these guys nonstop. We were so fortunate to hit home runs with Reggie Stubblefield, Russ Yeast, Julius Brents, that had an immediate impact, Cincere had an immediate impact until he was hurt, but that's going to be what we have to expect out of those guys, is to have an immediate impact.

We're going to have to all coach the heck out of these guys because the standard is high. They know the standard is high. That's why they came to K-State. But they also know there's an opportunity to play early. So we're excited about the challenge we have in the secondary.

Q. Chris, what makes Deuce so special?

CHRIS KLIEMAN: What he is off the field in my mind. He's a great talent. Everybody knows he's a great talent. I tell the story, we had a youth camp in late April, early May before the guys left for May break, and we had a session that ended at 11:30 and the autographs were 11:30 to 12:00 and then there was a break for the players.

As you can imagine, Deuce's line was really, really long, and he stayed out there for an extra hour signing autographs for every kid that was there and taking pictures.

He knows the gig. But that's a credit to him, a credit to his parents, because of the way they raised him. He's appreciative of what Kansas State has provided him, and we appreciate him sticking with K-State because it's a great fit.

The kid is as good a practice player as he is a game player. He's as good in the film room as he is on the practice field. He's as good in the weight room as he is taking care of his body, rehab, recovery, nutrition. And you need those guys in your program for all the young players to see that it just doesn't happen.

Yeah, the kid is talented, but it just doesn't happen. It's doing all the little things on the field, off the field, in the classroom, in the community, in the weight room, in the rehab center so that you have your body at the very best, and then doing it with an absolute smile on your face no matter what.

That's fun for me to see every day.

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