

Big 12 Conference Football Media Days

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Las Vegas, Nevada, USA
Allegiant Stadium

Arizona State Sun Devils Kenny Dillingham Press Conference



KENNY DILLINGHAM: Super excited to be in the Big 12. Excited to play in all these unbelievable cities with the unbelievable atmospheres for our guys to play in.

I think this is one of the best-coached conferences in the league. One of the -- I think from top to bottom, I think every game is a grind. And really excited to be a part of it.

Q. What would your to-do list for fall camp look like aside from the obvious, establishing a starting quarterback?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: For us, is continuing to establish a culture of toughness. I think that's the number one thing that if you watched this league and you look at the teams that have continually won in this league and college football that are joining this league, it's teams that are tough and training and teaching our kids how to respond to adversity, the good and the bad.

And those are the things that we've been harping on the last year. Those are the things in fall camp that we're going to continue to preach.

Q. With all the new things happening in your program, a new conference, your second year new AD, what does a successful season look like for you guys this year?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: This is a very cliché answer, but success in our program is being the very best you can be all the time at whatever you're doing. That's it. That's all we want to do.

We want to get better. We want to grow every single day. There's not a win total. There's not a goal like that. It's just be the very best we can be at everything we do.

Q. You talked about building a culture of toughness,

and you've also used external factors like the EA Sports game, like your guys' place in the preseason tournament to sort of motivate your guys. As a coach, how important is it to you not only find ways to motivate your guys but different ways to relate to them as well?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Naturally my age, I kind of understand a little bit more what goes on in an 18-to-23-year-old's mind, but at the same token, I was raised by a guy who went to the Naval Academy. We're going to be five minutes early everywhere we go, we're going to treat people with respect.

And I think at the end of the day, you have to instill a toughness in your team. And that's what wins consistently in college football. And, yes, are there unique things that we may do that are a little bit different? Yeah, but the end game is we're trying to get the same result.

Q. What would you say are the big differences between your roster now versus a year ago, physically, culturally, or any other way?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: One, I think our guys know each other's names. Sounds like a little thing, but they know each other, have relationships with each other.

Two is pure strength. Last year we had two guys who could squat over 600 pounds. Now we have six. Last year we had -- I think it was 44 guys on our team squat 400 pounds. Now we have upwards of 65, somewhere in the 70s, I believe.

So our size and strength of our football team was something that we focused on. And now that we've kind of hit our summer goals from that perspective, I'm excited to see it translate to football.

Q. College football will now have tablets on the sideline with live video from every angle. Do you see that benefitting coaches that grasp that technology, and how specifically is it going to change Arizona State on the sidelines?



KENNY DILLINGHAM: Yeah, I mean, it's like cheating. You don't have to see the game live. You don't have to adapt. I think really what it does is it's going to create bigger game plans because before you may be able to get away with something that somebody didn't see, a twist game, the alignment of a linebacker being plussed over a three technique, now people will be able to see it. You're almost going to have to carry, in my opinion, a larger game plan in order to change when teams change because they literally get to watch live video of you.

Q. Obviously you had some wins and losses in recruiting, NIL. Rashada leaves, but you still manage to recruit a very good crop. What are some of the lessons you learned just from even dating back to Oregon, some lessons you've had to learn the hard way about thinking you had the perfect player and maybe like situations didn't work out, and how do you kind of move forward with the quarterback room and how you kind of look for the recruits you want and recruiting in general?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: We have three things that we look for other than the physical skills. We want good people. One of our goals of our program, our rules are be a good person. We want people to make good decisions. Making good decisions is another of our rules.

We want people who bring joy. Either you're going to be a multiplier in our program or a divider. And I don't want dividers. I want people who multiply, people who make people around them better. No energy vampires.

And honesty in the recruitment process. That's one thing I can say with a lot of confidence, is we're going to tell you the truth when we recruit you, and you're probably going to have a better scenario when you're here than what we tell you when we recruit you.

And I think the key nowadays to college football is retention. And I think the only way, unless you can just have -- pay players more money and unlimited amount of money, you have to gain their trust and be honest with them.

And I think the retention piece of college football is the most important thing, and I think that's just trust and respect with your players.

And right now in recruiting, our coaches aren't our best recruiters. Our players are our best recruiters. Our players are selling our brand. Our players are telling them that our coaching staff doesn't change. Our players are telling them the standards that are being set. It's not us recruiting, it's our players recruiting, and I think that's what

excites me the most.

Q. Just wanted to know, have you had a chance to connect with Brent Brennan yet, and what have those interactions looked like?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: We talked a few times. His son came to our camp there year. Good high school quarterback. We've connected. Good guy. Excited to have him in our league.

Q. You talked about obviously getting ready for teams and stuff like that, coming from Oregon, knowing the Pac-12. In this offseason, getting ready for these different teams, not that you were not excited or energetic before, but how has the offseason been for you in preparation?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: It's exciting because this league probably has more diversity in terms of defensive scheme than any league I've ever been in. This league, you see four down, you see four down simulated pressures, you see odd fronts, you see odd fives, you see four down fronts with 4-2-5 schemes and you see four down with three high safety schemes.

Most leagues I've been in have one or two flavors of the league. This league has variety of flavors. You have to be able to practice that in your fall camp and build it into your schedule so the first time your guys haven't seen it is the week leading up to the week of the game. I think that's one of the most fun parts of this league from an offensive perspective.

And then defensively, this league has turned into smashmouth, and you've got to practice tough to be competitive in this league. And that's something that I hope our defense embraces and takes on, is that toughness of what it takes to stop people in this league with all the running backs.

Q. How important are the newfound strengths up front to this offense with the strengths at the skill position as well? Do you feel like you've given enough for Sam Leavitt to thrive at quarterback?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Yeah, I think anytime at quarterback the goal is to keep quarterbacks comfortable, get them in rhythm, keep them comfortable, put them in positions to where they can have throws and they can have plays off.

I think if you put everything on a quarterback, every snap, right, that's very, very difficult for a quarterback to do, but how can you put a lot on the quarterback but be able to

turn him off and let him just hand the ball off, let him just throw a bubble screen, let him throw a screen?

And I think for us, up-front-wise we have nine, ten guys I would feel comfortable playing, which is quite the difference of last year when we lined up in the swinging gate because we traveled six scholarship guys.

So I do think that's a drastic difference, and I'm excited about that.

Q. You just talked about what you look for in your guys, you look for good people, you look for multipliers, but for you, out of the newcomers coming in, who are some of the guys that exemplify that?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: Newcomers, there's a lot, to be honest. There's not just one guy. I think that's just the type of person we're trying to bring in.

So I would say there's a bunch. I don't want to name one or two specifically because I think that's doing the other guys disjustice.

Q. You all faced Ollie Gordon early in the season. Were you surprised at just what he sort of turned into from a national level after that? And then second part, what kind of unique challenge does he present when it comes to stopping him or slowing him down?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: No, I mean, he was great when we watched a little bit of film on him, and he was great when we played him.

And the challenging thing is he's a workhorse, man. He's big. He's strong. And he just keeps going. He just keeps going. They can keep giving him the ball. And I think that's challenging. And he wears on you throughout a football game. And I think that's the philosophy Coach Gundy has built there. And I think he really fits that mold. That's the style of running back they consistently recruit. And he's a really, really good football player.

Q. Transition, head coach year one, year two, lessons learned, what's changed and what's going to make you a better coach year two?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: I love football. I've been coaching football since I was 18 years old. Seventh and eighth graders, high school. Coached linebackers, defense. I love football.

And then after all those years, you become a head coach and you just want to watch football, and you don't just get to watch football anymore.

What I learned is I've got to trust the people around me to do football more, and I've got to remove myself a little bit from that and not get as involved in game weeks. Just because I love it so much, it's why you start coaching. But now that my role is different, that's one thing I learned, I've got to remove myself a little bit.

I have to trust if I ask someone to make Italian food and he makes chicken Parmesan, that I'm going to like the chicken Parmesan; I didn't want him to make meatballs, and if I wanted him to make meatballs, I should have told him to make meatballs.

And I have to trust that. I think that's the biggest thing I learned is I'm not the smartest guy in the room and to trust people.

Q. I have a two-part question. First one, how would you describe your home game environment to those that maybe haven't played there or if you're trying to say this is what our football environment is like? And if you could go golfing with one of the coaches from this new conference, who would you take with you and why?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: I mean, our environment is it's loud. We have one of the best student sections in college football I believe, and it's hot. So it's loud and hot. Normally we play at night. It's an unbelievable environment. I think pregame at our place is unreal with the Tillman statue and our players running right by it. I think it's something it's unbelievable to be part of.

For me, I would have to say probably Coach Whittingham, just the success he's had and the consistency being at a place for a long time, I just have a lot of respect for what he's done. And he's a fun guy. He rides Harleys, right?

Q. You open up your Big 12 schedule at Texas Tech on the road. Can you kind of talk about how you overcome those nerves, or do you play into those emotions for that kind of a game?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: I definitely think our guys are going to be excited for it. I think from like a conference change and first game like that, I really don't think it's going to have an effect.

But I do think we have to prepare for the noise. We're going to play -- last year there was one and a half games where we had to use a silent count. I think most of the games on the road this year we're going to have to be on a silent count. So how we practice that silent count, the variety of silent counts we use, I think we're going to have

to be way more strategic with how we practice to prepare ourselves for road games in the league starting in Lubbock.

Q. Last season you guys had a pretty grueling injury bug. I remember you mentioning late last season you couldn't practice with two sides of the line of scrimmage. But despite that, you guys got a late win over UCLA, Washington State, including a really close loss in Seattle against a team that ended up in the national title game, and you guys had those guys dead to rights. What does it mean to have those types of performances late in the season despite that adversity, and what do you hope to take away from those performances?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: I think you have to learn how to win. I think learning how to win, you never know when it's going to happen. It's very, very difficult. I think our guys have to learn how to win in the biggest moments. It's just the next play.

And I remember vividly when I was at Florida State, we struggled for a year and a half there to get it off the ground, and then we played Syracuse at home, 0-4. We had a two-minute drive with Jordan Travis coming back as the starter. I think he made about 97 people miss on that drive, led us back to win.

And since then, the program is drastically different. The guys learned how to win. It sounds cliché, it sounds like how do you learn how to win, it just happens. It happens when you respond to adversity. It happens through happening. Once they got the belief they could do it, that's when your program flips. And you hope that happens sooner rather than later.

Q. Considering you're the youngest coach in the Big 12 and you talked about some of your experience with having a rough transition becoming a head coach and some of the downfalls you experienced last season, what obstacles do you expect to overcome in the Big 12 this fall?

KENNY DILLINGHAM: I think for us, not really many different obstacles. I think the obstacles we'll overcome I don't know about yet. I think that's part of the sport. I think that's the part of everything, is you can prepare for whatever you want to prepare for, but there's going to be situations that you have to be ready to adapt to.

I think from a football standpoint, like I said, the noise, the atmosphere, traveling to small towns, maybe have to stay an hour outside of town, when do you leave for home games and do you like the transition in and out of staying 45 minutes away from a place, I think those things are

obviously part of the change. But I think the biggest thing is just the style of play that I'm excited for and then the atmospheres that we're going to play in.

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