

Big 12 Conference Football Media Days

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Allegiant Stadium

Arizona Wildcats Brent Brennan Press Conference

BRENT BRENNAN: Hello. Really excited to be here. What an incredible day this has been. I'm not sure it's an advantage or a disadvantage being last, but I've been talking a lot today so I may need to hydrate as we're going.

Could not be more excited to be at the University of Arizona. It's an incredible opportunity, something that I've thought about for a very, very long time, and I'm excited about everything that's happening there right now.

We've got great new leadership in our athletics department with Desireé Reed-Francois. There is all kinds of excitement about the football team we had a year ago, so there's tremendous momentum. And a lot of those players chose to stay together and move forward together, which I think is rare and one of the best stories in college football this season, which I think needs to be told more often.

Ticket sales and excitement for joining the Big 12 Conference is extremely high.

We're fired up, can't wait to get this thing going. Bear Down.

Q. You mentioned the guys who chose to stay and stick together. Keeping Noah seemed really key. Pretty common today, a guy loses his coach, goes to a good school, he just goes with him. How were you able to keep Noah, and how key was that to keeping everybody together?

BRENT BRENNAN: I would say TMac and Jacob Manu and Jonah Savaiinaea had more to do -- Gunner Maldonado, more to do with keeping Noah Fifita there than I did.

The truth is these players really loved each other. Coach Fisch and that staff recruited a bunch of quality young men that were incredibly committed and connected, and I think



that's what contributed to them wanting to stay.

Q. Last year at Mountain West Media Day, I talked to you about the walk-on culture that you helped produce at San Jose State. How were you planning on carrying that over here to Arizona? And how has the process been transitioning to Arizona, especially with all the connections you have in the Bay Area?

BRENT BRENNAN: Those are two big questions. I'll try and answer them both.

The first one I would say is that the walk-on program is a critical part of college football. Frequently those guys are the heart and soul of your football team. They're the scout teamers. They're the players that don't get the reward of either a scholarship or playing on game day. Now, sometimes they do, but I think they are just an absolute key component. I was a walk-on. So those guys have a special place in my heart.

Then it's always one of the most rewarding things you get to do as a coach when you get to put one of those players on scholarship, which we were able to do a lot at San Jose, and we've actually even done already at Arizona. So the walk-on program is going to be a critical part of how we build our roster every year.

The second part is how has the transition been? It's been great. It's been fast and furious, but it's been wonderful to be at a place that I've thought highly of and that I love and appreciate in the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona.

We're just trying to build a football team and keep moving forward every day, and it's been buying a house and getting acclimated and all that stuff.

We're not quite done yet, but we're kind of getting focused on football now, so that's more important.

Q. Noah said when you were first hired, he got about 25 guys to come talk to you. What were those conversations like? What did you ask those guys?

BRENT BRENNAN: I didn't ask them anything. I let them



ask me. I thought it was important I give them an opportunity to get to know me, like who I was, what I was going to be about. And it was speed dating. They asked me a thousand questions in a two-hour span, and at the end of it -- some of them were silly and fun and we were laughing and smiling and joking, and some of them serious. It was a really great kind of icebreaker for all of us to get to know each other. And I think Noah spearheading it was a huge part of that.

But then at the end of the conversation, I asked the players if they wanted to do it again the next day, and they all agreed. So the next day, the same group, plus or minus a few, got together, and we had another two-hour conversation just about my philosophy, how I coach, what I believe in, what my family is like, what color cleats we're going to wear. It was all over the map. But it was a really great opportunity for us to get to know each other and for them to have an understanding that as a head coach they're going to have a lot of -- I'm the kind of coach that I want them to have input in what we're doing.

Now, at the end of the day, I know those decisions sit with me, but I want them to have input into what kind of program, what kind of culture we're going to build at the U of A.

Q. How have your roots at U of A with your brother playing there inspired confidence, motivation and just overall excitement in your first year as head coach?

BRENT BRENNAN: Well, that part has been really special. My wife also went to school there. There's a lot of carryover for me. My mentor, Dick Tomey, was there for a really long time. It's very, very special for me to come back there.

It's also given me a really cool connection to kind of that '90s generation that was either in school at the same time I was at UCLA or right after me when my brother was at University of Arizona.

It's very special for me to be back there. I will say it's an incredible responsibility because of how much I know everyone cares about Arizona football.

Q. I know there was a lot to do when you were first hired, but are you able to kind of take a dive into the Big 12? Do you look at styles of play or anything like that? Or is it a week-to-week basis as you're planning for teams?

BRENT BRENNAN: So I've gotten asked this question a couple times. I think it's interesting, obviously we've already done preliminary scouting reports and all that kind

of stuff, but the truth of the matter is by the time we get into Big 12 play, we're going to have some film on everyone.

And so that part of it is -- when we get to that point, I'm probably going to be a little bit more concerned with this year, 2024, than I am from film from 2023, especially in the transfer portal era where rosters change so much, good players come and go, that kind of thing.

By the time we get into Big 12 play, I'll be more focused on what have they been doing, two, three, four, five weeks before we play them.

Q. Obviously going now into a new conference with a bunch of new teams, as well, with Arizona State, Colorado and Utah, is there any comfort in going to a new conference with a bunch of schools that you were very familiar with in the past?

BRENT BRENNAN: I think that helps. I think that helps. In maybe the simplest way it helps. It's just those venues are all places that I've coached games in. So that part of it, I think that's the unknown part for us joining the Big 12, is the new venues that we haven't played in yet, that our players haven't felt the crowd at some of these places or what that feels like on game day, because I think having a great home crowd kind of can impact the team.

I'm also excited for all these teams to come to Arizona Stadium and feel the ZonaZoo and feel our crowd and our fans and the city of Tucson and how they rally for the U of A.

Q. Coach, how have you tried to find balance between making changes and putting your own footprint on the program but also trying to continue a lot of the things that made the team so successful down the stretch last season?

BRENT BRENNAN: You know, I would say the easiest part of that is when we -- like offensively when we started putting that scheme together, we let the current players -- Noah Fifita, TMac, those guys -- have a lot of input in terms of keeping a lot of the verbiage the same.

So how we call plays -- I put the onus on the coaches to learn what they tag plays or how they communicated that a year ago and make that part of us, which that way only 10 guys have to learn it and not 70.

So that was the way we did that schematically, and defensively we were able to retain Duane Akina and Brett Arce and some other pieces there that the scheme will be the same or similar.

I would say that part of it, you always want to lean into the talent you have. That's just where I come from. I think part of that is making sure those players are comfortable in the schemes and situations you put them in on game day.

Q. TMac, a great player, obviously one of the top receivers in college football. What separates him from some of the others, both as a player and a person?

BRENT BRENNAN: TMac is one of those rare people that is actually fiercely competitive but is having fun during the competition. Like almost the way Steph Curry plays basketball. He's having so much -- he looks like he's having so much more fun than everybody else.

Then as a talent or as a receiver -- I'm an old receiver guy myself, not nearly as good as any of the guys I'm coaching right now -- but TMac's body control, his ability to finish 50/50 balls -- I think so many games in college or the NFL come down to a 50/50 throw on a short yardage play where you can't run it because they have too many people in the box, and his ability to finish those throws is -- to finish those catches, and Noah's ability to throw them makes TMac extremely rare.

Q. Arizona had five All-Big 12 selections. Does that give the team a chip on their shoulder, is that external motivation, being second most in the conference behind Oklahoma State there?

BRENT BRENNAN: I would guess those players don't even know that happened. I don't know who they are, either. Because I've been in this thing long enough to know that the only accolades that matter are the ones that come after the season. And that's what we're striving for.

So however those things are stated now, like okay, that's kind of -- I don't think that's where our focus should be. Our focus needs to be on the process and the work we need to do this summer to play good football in the fall.

Q. You talked about the '90s generation. You have Duane Akina as your defensive coordinator, Dino Babers as your offensive coordinator. Can you talk about that dynamic of bringing that old-school Arizona together?

BRENT BRENNAN: Well, I thought it was just important that I had people on the staff that love and care about the University of Arizona. We also added Bobby Wade who was a great player there in the late '90s, early 2000s. I think Brandon Sanders is in the building, Chuck Cecil is in the building, Ricky Hunley is in the building.

It's so important for me that there's players that played in

the uniform, that care deeply about the U of A touching our team, involved with our team. I really want that to be a part of it.

I think that's one of those things that it's hard to have if you haven't lived it, and those guys have lived it at such a high level, and I want our players to have that around them and to experience it.

Q. Coach, you guys have had a great deal of success as of late in Southern California, specifically in the Trinity League, and now that you're a West Coast guy and coming to Arizona into a new conference, will you expand that recruiting footprint? Are you going to stay true to the roots and stay West Coast centric?

BRENT BRENNAN: No, I think that's one of the really cool things about joining the Big 12 is it gives us a chance to get into some new markets where we're going to play multiple games a year. And because of our location, I think it does give us unique access to California as an Arizona school, but it also -- now this year we're playing two games in Utah, and we've got four opponents in Texas, Florida.

I think that part of it is exciting because it does open some new markets for you because you are going to play games, and all the players want to know can their families watch them play. That's such a big question in the recruiting process.

I think it's exciting for us, but I also think the state of California has always been good to the University of Arizona, and I think with our track record there and our coaching staff's relationships, it'll continue to be.

Q. Coach, obviously Coach Fisch said before that Arizona is a California-based recruiting school. They have a ton of talent. When you have guys coming in, you had Justin Flowe come in previously, what does a guy like that do, especially somebody who was like a five-star recruit? How has he developed? How is he gelling and finding his place in the defense? And did you get a chance to bring any walk-ons from San Jose State with you?

BRENT BRENNAN: So Flowe is doing great. He had a great spring. I think it's going to be a lot of fun to continue to watch him to develop and grow like all of our players because obviously we have an incredible player at that position, at one of those inside linebacker spots, in Jacob Manu.

It's going to be a lot of fun to watch that battle out during the fall because Jacob is what I would consider one of the unquestioned leaders of our football team, let alone our

defense, and he was also an All-Conference player a year ago.

So there's going to be a lot of fun at that linebacker position. Coach Gonzales is obviously a vet and one of the better coaches in the country, so I'm excited for him to be able to coach those guys and continue to develop that group.

Then we had some players from San Jose State join us. We had a couple guys transfer over who I think will be great additions to our program this year.

Q. Coach, Jedd Fisch last season did a really strong job of implementing Polynesian heritage within the culture and the program, and I'm curious how you will continue to implement that part into such -- that has become so integral to the culture of the program.

BRENT BRENNAN: So I think for me, my experience with that culture goes back to when I played in high school and college. That runway has given me great insight into that. That will always be part of us.

I think the beauty of the Polynesian culture is the family component, the component of respect, the hard work, all those things, and then just the natural talent that I think maybe the world is just starting to see now.

But that talent has been obvious on the West Coast and at the University of Arizona for years. And so at San Jose State, my last job, that was a huge part of who we were, and that's going to continue to be a huge part of who we are at the U of A.

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