

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Wednesday, August 23, 2023

Matt Cassel

Joshua Perry

Todd Blackledge

Michael Robinson

Press Conference



community and give great analysis.

The Big Ten itself, what it has going for it this year, as Todd also mentioned, we start off with West Virginia at Penn State. It will be my first time in Happy Valley. I'm excited about that. But in addition to that we've got a collection of an unbelievable slate of games to bring to you this year.

And also the future of the Big Ten and what that means with my alma mater, USC, UCLA, and now Oregon and Washington coming into it. It has a bright future ahead of it. I couldn't be more thrilled about this opportunity to be with NBC this year and be covering the Big Ten.

JOSHUA PERRY: I reiterate most of what everybody said already. It's an exciting time to be on NBC, and specifically covering the Big Ten and Notre Dame. A guy who grew up in the Midwest, so I couldn't be any happier to be part of the coverage here.

One of the things that I hope we all bring to you is just a celebration of college football. And I know a lot of people talk about the changing landscape, and we've mentioned a little bit of that and different things going on in the game.

But ultimately, when we get to Saturdays, I think it is time to celebrate what the young men out there are doing and all the coaches and all the time they put in and ultimately the pride and the tradition that comes along with this conference specifically.

I'm looking forward to our coverage again on site. It's going to be really exciting. But this is a great opportunity for us to really showcase what this conference is.

MICHAEL ROBINSON: I want to second what everybody has already said on the call and thank NBC for the opportunity to be on the pregame show, "Big Ten Saturday Night." We can't wait for that opportunity.

Obviously the first week is at my alma mater, Penn State, myself and Todd Blackledge's alma mater, Penn State. Hopefully the two Penn Staters on the crew, hopefully we can give them some luck and we get past Joshua and those guys at Ohio State, but I digress.

Definitely excited to be a part of this team. Honestly, I'm a

THE MODERATOR: Joining us is Todd Blackledge, a Penn State alum and studio analyst; Matt Cassel from USC; Joshua Perry, Ohio State; and Michael Robinson, Penn State. As a reminder, Todd is paired on our "Big Ten Saturday Night" game team with play-by-play.

TODD BLACKLEDGE: We're excited about the start of another college football season. I've been doing this a long time. I've been doing it many years and I can't recall being more excited about a season kicking off than this one. To be part of what NBC Sports is doing, their first-ever partnership with a college conference, and what the Big Ten has going for it in the years to come is very exciting.

To be in on the ground floor of that and to be their lead game analyst, along with Noah and Kathryn, to open it up, I couldn't have scripted it any better than to be in my old alma mater in Happy Valley, for a game we used to play every year, Penn State and West Virginia. It's going to be exciting to be a part of. I think the conference is in a great place.

They had nine teams out of 14 teams that had winning records last year. I think a lot of teams have improved. There's new coaches, new players, new quarterbacks, and I think it's going to be a heck of a year to watch.

MATT CASSEL: Like Todd said, I'm excited for college football. I'm excited to be back in the college football experience, so to speak. And also to add to that is just being part of NBC and this prestigious network and to have this opportunity to bring coverage on big Saturday night and also with Peacock with the "B1G College Countdown", couldn't be more thrilled to be part of this team, the collection of talent that we have, and at the same time each and every week be on site and give that college football atmosphere and bring it to life for the fans and the



former Big Ten Player of the Year. I covered the National Football League. I handle youth football here in the state of Virginia. So football is my life. To be part of this Big Ten opportunity is just everything for me.

I want to thank NBC for the opportunity. I can't wait to get going. And like Joshua said, it's a celebration of what these young men bring to the football field, as the Big Ten Conference is the best conference in all of football, in my opinion. Can't wait to get started.

Q. We've known that there's Big Ten fans from coast to coast. But now and into the future, starting this year, you guys are making it a national conference. How exciting is that for you in knowing that you're going to have a fan base that's always been coast to coast, but you're actually going to be able to see them up close and personal?

TODD BLACKLEDGE: I'll answer that quickly. When I made the move from ESPN to the Big Ten, I was thrilled just where the conference was, the fact that we had two teams in the College Football Playoff a year ago. I knew USC and UCLA were coming in, and that was exciting.

And with the addition, as Matt was saying, Oregon and Washington, you have four marquee programs joining the Big Ten.

As a football fan, I hate to see what's happening with the Pac-12, but as somebody that's now working and representing the Big Ten, I think it's going to be a fantastic conference to cover.

As far as game matchups, you have multiple, more possible outstanding game matchups for us on Saturday nights.

MATT CASSEL: I'll piggyback off of what Todd said. I grew up on the West Coast. I went to USC. I was part of the Pac-12. To see them dissolve, it was kind of shocking at the time.

But at the same time, where USC and UCLA, where Washington and Oregon landed in this conference of the Big Ten, and now with the expansion, it was one of those things growing up that everybody didn't always give a lot of love to those West Coast teams being in the Pac-12, playing a little later in the day.

But I think the notoriety of these schools, the brand names and the different matchups that it's going to create in the Big Ten is going to be exciting, not just for the Big Ten but the entire country and go coast to coast.

JOSHUA PERRY: Growing up in the Midwest the Rose Bowl was the pinnacle for me. I understand that dynamic is certainly changing now, but to get those matchups as regular-season matchups in conference is really going to lean into the tradition for people.

We'll get really great marquee matchups. But the year I won the championship in Ohio State in '14 we played Oregon. So much intrigue. It's a team that Ohio State hadn't historically faced a ton.

And I think even that desire to see those two brands on the football field was a part of the buildup, even though it was a championship game. I think people really desired to see that.

So the opportunity to, I think, satisfy that aspect of it from different fan bases and also just to really be coast to coast nationwide is a wonderful opportunity.

MICHAEL ROBINSON: Totally agree, Joshua. I remember being a player at Penn State, in the Big Ten, and after a certain time of the day your interest in college football kind of goes away because you know the Big Ten schedule is kind of over.

But to know that the national intrigue will last into the evening, it will be conversations going on on Sunday morning about what happened the night before because of UCLA, USC, Oregon and Washington being a part of the conference. It's just phenomenal.

I spent a part of my week on the West Coast covering the National Football League, and now that's also Big Ten country for real. And that's definitely something to be excited about.

Q. Having been to and covered that West Virginia-Penn State rivalry over the past, you've got to be excited for that one to be the first one out of the gate?

TODD BLACKLEDGE: I really am. Again, with the changes in college football, unfortunately some of the things that go away are rivalries and games that -- you were used to being a part of.

When I was at Penn State we finished the year against Pittsburgh every year. It was a great rivalry. We played West Virginia every year.

And the years I was at West Virginia, there was a little more added intrigue to that matchup because Don Nehlen was the head coach at West Virginia. And he's from Canton, Ohio. And he and my dad went to college forever.

I knew Don when I was growing up.

And Jeff Hostetler and I were battling it out for the starting quarterback at Penn State. We came in in the same recruiting class, and he ended up traveling to West Virginia. So we played against each other for the last couple of years in that rivalry.

And so I think it's great. I think West Virginia will have a good amount of fans there. I think they'll be well represented and it will be kind of fun to see that game taking place again.

Q. Michael and Todd, Penn State-centric, presumably we'll see Drew Allar make his first career start. Obviously you guys know this place and the expectation that come with playing this position the most. What are the challenges of being the starting quarterback and what advice would you give to Penn State's QB 1.

MICHAEL ROBINSON: We just talked about that yesterday.

TODD BLACKLEDGE: We absolutely did. Mike is on his way to sit down with Drew. And we talked about it on the phone yesterday.

First of all, the age that he is living in and playing in now is way different than it probably was when Michael played and definitely different from when I played, in terms of social media and just the fan connection to the programs and the depth charts and everything and the recruiting.

That's all so blown out and in front of everybody. And so the expectations on him are through the roof. And by all accounts, he seems like he's got the right temperament. He's got the right personality. He wants to be great. He wants to be coached. He's got humility. And he's got talent. He's got major talent.

But this is what Mike and I were talking about yesterday, it's still a big step up from where he was last year to where he will be if he's the starter on September 2nd in front of all of those people in a night game against a quality opponent like West Virginia.

It's managing those expectations. And I think the good thing for them, the great thing for him is Penn State, better than they have in the last several years, has a proven ability to run the football.

Their offensive line is better than they've been, and they've got some quality running backs. And that can be very, very helpful breaking a young quarterback in.

And so he does not have to go out there and sling it around 40 times for them to be in a position to win. And he doesn't have to make every critical play on third down.

So I think just him playing within himself and leaning on what they can do well right now will help him grow. And he's going to learn and grow and he's got the talent to be a great player, but I don't think that's going to happen overnight. It's just not something that -- I don't care how many stars you have in front of your name, from the recruiting analyst -- you still have to play and grow and learn as a starting quarterback. I think he'll do well.

MICHAEL ROBINSON: Todd, you hit it on the head. Yesterday, 110, 112,000 people with a bunch of expectations along with a large alumni base and everything that goes along with being the starting quarterback at Penn State.

And to Todd's point, yes, the run game is going to be his best friend as well as big-time defense. Now the defense has to show up like it showed up last year.

But he's going to be in big-time situations having to make big-time throws. I do think the fact that a lot of people are saying, from an arm-talent standpoint, he's probably the best or one of the best that has ever come out of the school. And that's a tremendous amount of pressure.

From what I've seen from the kid, being around the program in the offseason a little bit, lifting weights there and just seeing him around the team, he's a leader. He's doing a great job of handling practice, handling the workouts and handling everything that comes off the field with being a leader. And that's going to serve him well.

But, yeah, lean on that run game, a quality run game and a quality offensive line along with a tough-nosed defense will help him out. Now it's about making the right decisions in the moment. And from all reports he's been making the right decisions in practice.

But, again, come, what, September 2nd, it's a whole new ball game. I just can't wait to see him. Like I said, I'm about to go up there and talk to him, but I can't wait to see him in game, in person making those decisions because those decisions are going to determine the success of this team this year.

Q. Todd, which Big Ten stadium are you looking forward to calling games from? And for Matt, what are you hearing about the feeling that your alma mater, USC, final year in the Pac-12 and the Big Ten move coming next year. There's a new AD. So much change

happening with that university over the next 24 months.

TODD BLACKLEDGE: I'll answer the one about the stadium. I love to going to Penn State to do a game. I've really not done many games there. I've been to just about every Big Ten stadium to do a game during the course of my career.

One place I haven't been for a few years, I'm looking forward to going back to is Madison, Wisconsin, especially at night. It's already a really lively environment up there, a great college campus and sports town. And, so, I'm looking forward to hopefully calling a game at night up in Madison.

MICHAEL ROBINSON: You want to hear that?

MATT CASSEL: Fired up to hear that right now. In terms of USC, it's Lincoln Riley going into his second year. Had a great first season when he debuted last fall, but they fell short of going to the college football players.

And it came down to really the defensive side of the ball. They obviously have Heisman Trophy winner Caleb Williams. He's uniquely special in what he can do at the quarterback position. And I think they have a lot of firepower on the offensive side of the ball.

They went out and tried to address the defensive issues on the defensive side of the ball with a handful of transfers, the Georgia defensive lineman, Bear Alexander, got the guy from Oklahoma State, the linebacker Mason Cobb.

If they can boost that defense to play more complementary football in terms of offense and defense together I think they'll be in a good position.

I know their goal this year is to try to get into the College Football Playoffs. I think anything less than that will feel like it was a little bit of a let-down because even after a successful first year, their vision is to go to that College Football Playoff. And Lincoln Riley hopefully has positioned his team to go do so, because I think they've got the talent and quarterback. And now it's just making sure the defense can be bolstered and get some stops for them.

In terms of moving to the Big Ten, I know that USC is excited about the move. And just talking to people around that university, talking to some of the coaches, I think that there's an excitement in the air. There's excitement about these different matchups that you might see down the road -- a USC-Ohio State, a USC-Penn State.

And you talk to Josh, as Josh introduced it earlier, those

usually only happen when we went to the Rose Bowl. And I was privileged enough to play in the Rose Bowl. We played Michigan when I was at USC in the Rose Bowl. And these are matchups that have so much history behind them. And now you're going to get to see them in a regular season, especially next year, when they do come to the Big Ten, that there won't be just two separate divisions of the east and west, rather just one complete conference, which I think will make unique matchups for college football and for the college football fans.

Q. Todd, if I'm not mistaken, you were on the broadcast last year for the Michigan-Michigan State game. Obviously got overshadowed by what happened after the game. I'm curious what you remember about that night, if you sensed anything might have been brewing during the game. And just in general what you think needs to happen for that rivalry to keep the intensity without a repeat of what happened last year?

TODD BLACKLEDGE: I mean, I don't really know -- I didn't have any sense that there was anything brewing, other than the fact it was a very intense in-state rivalry to begin with. That's been the case for a long time.

I do think, in last year's game, that Michigan State had beaten them the year before. Kenneth Walker had a huge game and they beat Michigan. Even though Michigan made it to the College Football Playoff, that was the game they lost in the regular season.

So there was a lot at stake, I think, that Michigan felt. And they were clearly the better team last year and took care of business. They handled Michigan State particularly in the second half.

So I think, if anything, there was just maybe a build-up of frustration on the Michigan State side because in the second half they really couldn't do much against Michigan on either side of the ball. They were just outmatched.

As far as what can be done, I don't know. I don't know if -- I heard or read there were some plans for doing something different in the tunnel situation there in Ann Arbor. But cooler heads have to prevail in some form or fashion. If that means more security, if that means having a different protocol, how teams go in and come out of the locker room, whatever it is.

But the game's too good. The rivalry is too important. It's too special to have it marred by something that's unnecessary, and that's kind of the way -- unfortunately, that's what people remember about that game last year.

Q. Joshua and Michael, what are you guys most looking forward to, to being able to be an analyst for some games on top of your studio roles throughout the year?

JOSHUA PERRY: I think the most exciting thing for me about being on games is truly kind of feeling like you're a part of the game. I'm glad our pregame show is on campus because that's where the best energy comes from. I think it creates for great shows.

But when you're up there in the booth, you really feel it. You feel the situations of the game. You really feel the momentum swings and the turns. And, so, for me it's just an adrenaline rush there.

And, again, it's about the celebration of the game. I'm not too far removed from my playing days, so I understand how important it is for the players and coaches get highlighted properly.

I love being able to teach a little bit from the booth as well, but just the energy that comes from being up there, I don't think you can replace it.

MICHAEL ROBINSON: Joshua, that was good, dog. That's my answer, too. You know what I'm saying? But I'm playing, but for real, though.

I enjoy calling games. That's something I want to do more of is call games. I love the energy of game day. I love the player entering the arena. I love the fan experience. I love the fact that we're on the pregame show to feel that energy of being on site.

But honestly, I'm a football junkie. I'm a football nerd. To be able to call games and see the innovation of offense, see the innovation of defense -- one of the big things that Joshua and I have been talking about, especially with this Notre Dame -Navy game is the triple option and being able to defend it and quarterback reads and things, just being able to really dig into the nuts and bolts of football and being able to find unique ways to teach it to the viewer and entertain the viewer at the same time, while also making them ask questions, too.

That's what I try to do when I call games. It's something that I've always wanted to do. And the opportunity that NBC has given us to do that is just tremendous. So, yeah, it's an awesome opportunity.

Q. Wanted to ask about Michigan specifically and kind of how you see them stacking up against some of the other teams that are ranked in the top this year, specifically in the South. And specifically when

comparing to what Michigan was two years ago when they took the field with Georgia, how much do you feel that gap has maybe closed, if at all, in terms of what Michigan has now, how they've retained guys and the experience that they have?

TODD BLACKLEDGE: I think Michigan is an incredibly talented team. I think quite possibly this is Jim's most talented team that he's had, and it's just kind of amazing to think how far they've come since the 2020 season when they were not a very good football team and didn't look like he was going to be still coaching there. It was not a good situation.

And then the last two years they have really turned the thing around. And I think coming into this year, with the guys they have coming back, with the way they've been able to refortify their offensive line again through the transfer portal, second year for the same defensive coordinator and system with a lot of talent on that side of the ball, I just think that they are well positioned to make a run at the whole thing.

Now, obviously they've got some tough teams on their side of the conference. Penn State is thinking this is their year. Ohio State has been beaten by them two years ago and certainly don't want to allow that to become three.

But I think Michigan is capable of closing that gap and making a run at things. They've not fared well in the two years of being in the playoffs. Last year I did the game against TCU, and I don't think anybody thought that TCU was going to win that game, except for people from Fort Worth. But they played a great ball game and Michigan helped them.

They made some uncharacteristic mistakes. Couple of pick-sixes, a couple of other things they had not done all year. And they put themselves in a tough spot. And TCU capitalized and beat them.

The one thing I love about Michigan, in addition to the fact that they get Blake Corum back, who I think is one of the best players in all of college football, is they've got an experienced quarterback now in J.J. McCarthy, and he got better each time out last year. Even in that TCU game after throwing two pick-sixes, came back and played like a stud the whole game and gave them a chance to win in the end.

You look at Georgia. They're breaking in a new quarterback. Ohio State is breaking in a new quarterback. Alabama is breaking in a new quarterback.

In some cases they haven't even announced who that guy

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

is going to be yet. The fact that Michigan has that guy set, I think, is a huge advantage for the Wolverines going into this year.

JOSHUA PERRY: I just wanted to touch on the quarterback specifically, too. Todd, I think it's a great point you bring up. Just nationally, looking at the quarterback turnover, I think builds an advantage for Michigan, but also looking within the conference.

You mentioned two of their biggest competitors have got new quarterbacks rolling out there. And Penn State probably in a better position than Ohio State just from experience even with the young quarterback. That's huge.

But the rest of the team is extremely well constructed. We talk about running backs, talk about the offensive line. I think they have a stud tight end in Colston Loveland who really came on toward the end of the year last year.

Defensively probably a question maybe about edge rusher, but they can work through that throughout the year. I love the interior of their defensive line. Linebackers are going to be great. Secondary has a couple of studs back there, Rod Moore and Will Johnson.

And just the big question, when you talk nationally, is when you get into that situation where you need the shootout and you need to score the points and you need to do it quickly, how much has J.J. developed? And what wide receivers really emerge by the end of the year, I think is going to be the biggest question.

But we also understand that this is a team that likes to be gritty. I think they're comfortable winning in games where they really have to grind it out and it's close. And so maybe it never comes down to that. That would be my only question there.

But just from the veteran nature of this team, the coaching staff and how well constructed they are, I think they match up with all the big dogs nationally.

MICHAEL ROBINSON: I agree with you guys. And, again, I won't be long on this one. I totally agree. I think Michigan definitely matches up.

J.J. McCarthy, from everything we've seen in the past couple of years and obviously through the offseason, the guy can play football. To me Blake Corum is one of the top running backs in all of football.

To me, guys, it's a mentality that Michigan likes to bring. It's that exotic smash, the same thing that Jim did in the National Football League. And if they can keep that

mentality through the college football, yes, they match up with everybody in the country, and they have a great chance of winning it all.

MATT CASSEL: If you want my two cents I think they can compete with anybody. You look at their roster, they're returning 13 of their 22 starters from last year. Again, we know about Blake Corum, we know about Donovan Edwards. We know that they're (indiscernible) on the defensive side of the ball. Again, I think it comes down to J.J. McCarthy because at some point, especially with the College Football Playoffs, and you're going up and you might have to throw it around the field, he'll have to play -- when his best is required he's going to have to play at his best.

I think for J.J. McCarthy you're going to want to see continuous growth. I talked to Jim Harbaugh while we were at the Big Ten media day, and he thinks this kid is a generational talent. And the strides he's made from year one as a full starter last year to going into year two, he thinks it's going to be a night-and-day difference just with his comfort level.

The guys around him, his overall confidence he has going into these games, I think, he could have an exceptional year.

Q. Todd, why is it that you chose to leave ESPN/ABC to come to NBC? What was the big draw that made you think that this move was best?

TODD BLACKLEDGE: Well, I was very happy where I was. I love the crew that I worked on. I had been on that same crew for 17 years. I had different play-by-play guys, but the same director, a lot of the same camera guys. I was very happy there and doing a playoff game every year.

But my contract was up, and when I had some discussions with NBC and -- a couple of things. First of all, I was very intrigued by what they were going to do and how they wanted to do it and what their plans were for this package. That was number one.

Number two, I felt very honored and very sought after by them. They made it very clear to me that they really wanted me to be the guy. And they felt like my experience and my credibility teamed with Noah, who is a young and up-and-coming star would be a great pairing. So they made me feel very wanted and very special for this particular package.

And then just the actual contract that they ended up offering me in terms of compensation and length, at this point in my career and my life, it was just too good for me



to say no to.

And ever since I made the decision, not a day has gone by that I haven't just felt so happy with the decision I made. All of my dealings with everybody that I've had dealings with at NBC, from the time I signed my contract to now -- and we haven't even done a game yet -- has been just been outstanding.

And it's just got a great feel to it. The company has a great family-type feel to it. I'm thrilled to be working with Noah and Kathryn and Matt Marvin and Chuck D. (phonetic), our producer and director, and the people that are in the studio, the guys I'm on the call here with.

It's going to be a blast. We're going to have a lot of fun. And prime-time football games -- I guess this is probably the last thing; it's part of what attracted me to their package -- when I was at CBS many years ago I loved it there too, doing SEC games. And I left CBS to go to ESPN for the simple reason of doing the prime-time Saturday night game, because to me college football in prime time just looks bigger, it feels bigger, it sounds bigger. And I love doing prime-time football games.

So to go now and start this new venture of doing Big Ten on Saturday night and prime time all over this conference, it's going to be awesome for me.

Q. Joshua, will you be part of Big Ten Network still? What was your decision process in coming over to NBC?

JOSHUA PERRY: No, I won't be a part of Big Ten Network any longer. And the decision-making process for me was pretty straightforward. Similarly to Todd, I was coming up on an expiring contract and obviously had read the tea leaves about where the TV packages were going.

For me, this was an opportunity to take the next step in my career and to be at a place with high-production value and high-quality people, and I really wanted to do that.

I'm fortunate. I'm 29 years old and had this opportunity to be on a big stage in prime time. I'm working with phenomenal people both on and off air. So it set up for me to take that next step.

Again, extremely fortunate. But work is just getting ready to begin and I couldn't be more excited to get out there.

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